Someone Was Changing from the Inside Out

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Someone Was Changing from the Inside Out

by rosenritter

Summary

Will Graham, a forensic daemonologist who teaches at the FBI's training academy, is asked to consult on a case concerning the disappearance of eight girls with irregular daemons. When the case expands to include Dr. Hannibal Lecter as his new psychiatrist and sounding board, they find themselves both keeping their secrets close to their chests. But how long can they go before something slips?

Or: the daemon/omegaverse fusion AU combo platter that probably only I ever asked for.

Notes

Aaaand I'm back! For more information about where I've been and the status of some of my other projects, see my tumblr post here.

The first real chapter of this story will be posted on Wednesday, the day before a friend and I head out to FannibalFest! Let me know if you're heading there and would like to say hi to an internet-awkward, hiatus-prone doofus. :)

The title for this story comes from The Mountain Goats song "Nine Black Poppies" because apparently they're the only band I listen to.

It's good to be back.

Prologue: Meanwhile, Across the World

LAKE ARTHUR, LOUISIANA - JUNE 5TH - 7:30 PM

The summer night is hot and humid, and the full moon high above calls the tree frogs to sing in the mangrove branches that shelter the Grahams' little anchored houseboat. Remy Graham sits in his deck chair, his right leg pulled up with its ankle over the broad part of his left thigh. He rests his elbows on his horizontal leg to stabilize his hands as he whittles at a hunk of wood.

There is a brief lull in in the frogs' conversation. In the sudden quiet, Remy hears the tell-tale sound of stubby nails against raw skin. "No scratching," he says, glancing over to his son.

Will jerks his hand away from where he had been scratching at his right leg, which still has a few healing but lingering chicken pox sores on it. "Sorry," the little boy mumbles. Sabine, his daemon, droops her floppy beagle ears and rolls over onto her back in apology.

Remy's eyes soften. "It ain't your fault. I know it's hard," he says. Returning his attention to his whittling, he adds, "We can put some more lotion on it before you go to bed."

The frogs resume their singing.

Several minutes later, Will speaks up again. "Dad?"

"Mm?"

"What kinda animal was mom's daemon?"

Remy sighs and looks over to Will again. "Why d'ya wanna know?"

Will doesn't answer verbally. He shrugs as much as he is able to while lying stomach-down. A few sheets of paper are strewn in front of him, and Remy can make out crayon drawings of himself and his daemon Tallulah. Will does not look to him with the large, curious, puppy-dog-pleading eyes many children would unleash on their parents when hitting them with such a question. Instead, from where Remy is sitting, Will's eyes are completely obscured by his mop of curly brown hair. Will hasn't even been on the planet for six full years and yet this is far from the first time he has found his own child completely inscrutable.

But inscrutable as he is, Will is also an undersized, scrawny little thing, and Remy's heart clenches at how small and vulnerable the boy looks in this particular moment. All cheap, oversized clothes bought second-hand in the hopes that Will can grow into them just in time for them to become threadbare.The reality of their financial situation means that he can't

offer Will much in the way of worldly luxuries, but he can at least try to offer his understanding.

“A bird.”

“What kinda bird?”

“A great blue heron.”

“What do they look like?”

“You’ve seen ‘em.They’re real big. They’ve got long skinny legs. And real long necks,” Remy says, watching as Will starts drawing according to his description. The boy reaches for a periwinkle crayon. “I know I said they’re called ‘blue herons’, but it’s not that exciting. It’s just a science way of saying ‘grey’.”

When the broad strokes of Will’s drawing are close to being completed, Remy continues, “Their beaks are yellow, long and pointy. And lastly they got these streaks of black that start around their eyes and swoop up the sides of the head until they end up as a couple of skinny feathers sticking off the back of the head.”

“Like this?” Will asks as he awkwardly draws two long, trailing feathers off the bird’s head. Even as children’s drawings go, it isn’t very well-rendered. But then Remy considers that Will has never really been drawn to art the way he was to other activities. Most other homes with five-year-olds are practically wallpapered with their drawings, but in the Graham houseboat, there are easily five or six fly fishing lures Will has made for every drawing he has created.

“Yeah, just like that,” Remy says, smiling. The expression falters slightly when his eyes land on one of the other pictures: a woman with big blue eyes and curly dark hair wearing a long white dress. Her lips are turned down in a small frown. “Who’s that?”

“Mom.”

“We don’t got any pictures of your mom. What makes you think she looks like that?”

“You have light hair that isn’t curly and sometimes you’re sad when you look at me,” Will explains as if he’s describing something as obvious and unremarkable as the weather. “So I probably look a lot like mom.”

Remy stares at the strange, sad, sharp little creature that is his son and wonders if other parents can go through nearly six years of single-parenthood and still feel so completely and utterly out of their depth or if this is another experience singularly unique to parenting Will Graham. He debates telling the boy that he’s wrong, that just looking at him doesn’t remind him of being young, dumb, and overcome by a woman who by her very nature would never grow old with him. That the curl of his boy’s hair does not bring him back to the night that he first saw her, an impossible vision of wild and wind-tossed hair as she dragged him coughing and sputtering from the hurricane’s storm surge. That when Will runs to his bed crying after a

particularly intense nightmare, those haunted blue eyes don't look exactly like the ones he stared into when she handed him Will and turned away.

He tells himself that Will isn't old enough to understand, but deep down he knows that's not true. He's the one who's just not ready to tell.

"Her hair was longer." It's the only thing Remy can find to say in the end. Will grabs his dark brown crayon and adds length to the accurate if childishly-rendered portrait of a woman he has only ever seen through foggy newborn eyes.

Remy needs a drink. A smoke. A week or two or three out in the deepest parts of the bayou, alone together with Tallulah, thinking little and saying less until he isn't sure if he's lost speech altogether and has finally become a simple creature in its only natural habitat.

But he can't have that, not while someone so new depends on him. He forces himself to stop staring at Will's art and returns his gaze to the wood in his hand. If he knew what he had been whittling before, it's certainly lost to him now. The entire process feels unfamiliar and beyond him as he unsteadily brings the knife back to the wood. The little curls of discarded wood pile at the side of his old beaten-up boot.

When he's finished, he finds that he has carved a bird out of the wood. He can't tell if it's a specific type of bird, and he knows he doesn't want to keep working at it just in case it takes on a more distinct shape. He runs a calloused thumb over the creature's prominent beak. No splinters. Still, he'll need to stain and shellac it before handing it over to Will.

He looks over at the boy again and sees Will and his daemon curled up together, sound asleep. The crayons have rolled off in different directions all around their slumbering bodies. Remy lets out a soft huff of laughter and stands, stretching out the tight muscles of his legs.

He picks Will up easily, taking care not to touch Sabine as he does so. Will murmurs something indistinct in his sleep and burrows his face into the crook of Remy's neck. The soft splash of parting water sounds from behind them as Tallulah lumbers up the ramp that dips into the lake. She is an uncommonly large hellbender - nearly three feet long from the end of her snout to the tip of her tail. She pulls herself towards them until she is at Sabine's side. She nudges the sleeping puppy with her damp snout.

Sabine rolls over, transforming into a small hellbender as she turns. Remy frowns and begins rubbing Will's back insistently. "C'mon, bud, wake up. You don't wanna have Sabine like that all night," he says. "Don't you want her soft and cuddly in your bed instead of her having to sleep in the water?"

Will grumbles sleepily and opens his eyes. "Oh, yeah…" he mutters, squinting and rubbing at his eyes. Sabine changes into a particularly fluffy malamute puppy and waddles blearily after them as Remy carries Will into the interior of their houseboat.

It only takes him about twenty minutes to get Will into his pajamas, teeth brushed, calamine lotion applied, and ready for bed. But by the time Will has burrowed into his covers with Sabine in his arms, Remy is already starting to feel like his skin is too tight and the air too wrong with Tallulah drying out beside him.

“D’ya want a story?”

Will shakes his head. “Tallulah already hurts.”

“It ain’t that bad. If you want, I can-”

Will shakes his head again, more insistently. He buries his fingers deeper in Sabine’s fur.

Remy sighs. “Alright,” he says. He reaches down and softly ruffles the curls that fall over Will’s forehead. “G’night.”

“‘Night,” Will murmurs, already drifting off.

Remy’s chest aches as he turns and leaves Will’s little stateroom. On his way back to the deck, he opens the slightly rusty refrigerator in the kitchen and grabs a can of the cheap beer he keeps hidden in the back. He rubs the cold can against his forehead and neck, trying to slow his increasingly haggard breathing. He sets the beer on his deck chair.

With a grunt, he lifts his daemon and throws her back into the water. Immediately he draws in a long, deep breath of the hot summer air. He already feels a bit less encumbered. But not enough.

He collapses into his deck chair with a sigh. Letting his mind water, he can feel Tallulah’s contentment as she sinks into the shallow waters of the lakeshore. Under a water-smooth stone, secret and alone. Where they belong.

Before he even realizes it, the beer can is empty. With the tolerance he has built up, it’s nowhere near enough for him to get tipsy, let alone drunk. He crumples the can and tosses it back inside.

As he watches the can sail through the air, he notices something off in the distance down the riverbank. It’s difficult to determine what the thing may be, but he can tell that it’s tall and skinny. The clouds above part and the moon begins to shine down against the rippling water. With the assistance of the moonlight, the shape becomes easier to make out.

Standing alone in a clearing is a large great blue heron. Remy stares at the creature, first in disbelief and then in the blank stoicism of a thousand different conflicting emotions mixing together, the way all colors in a watercolor set become muddy black when swirled together.

“Bonsoir, Faustus.”

The bird tilts his head back, opens his beak, and calls out coarsely into the night. He then spreads his enormous wings and with a few strong flaps, propels himself into the night air. Within seconds, the bird is gone.

Remy leans back in his chair and shuts his eyes tight.

THE LECTER ESTATE - ALYTUS COUNTY, LITHUANIA - JUNE 6TH - 3:30 AM

The floorboards are cool and creaky beneath Mischa's bare feet as she steps out into the hallway outside her room. She leaves her door open so the moonlight can filter through the large bay window by her bed and out into the windowless hall. In her long white night dress with the dim light making her blonde hair shine almost silver, she looks frail and ghostly.

The light from the window doesn't provide nearly enough illumination for her human eyes to make out much in the hall. Vytautas changes into the form of a pygmy owl and flaps up onto her shoulder. Using his wide eyes, he peers down the far end of the hallway.

"Are we being silly?" Mischa asks.

"I don't think so," Vytautas replies softly, twisting his head 180 degrees to look down the other end of the hall. "We're too shaken up to go back to sleep, after all. He'll make us feel better. Besides, since it's after midnight, we can wish him happy birthday early."

"What if we wake him up?"

Vytautas scoffs. "He's always awake before us no matter what we do."

"Well, that's true. But he's older than us. He doesn't need as much sleep."

"Maybe."

They proceed down the hallway step by step. About three-quarters of the way through the walk, the combination of the darkness, the soft creaking and settling sounds of the old mansion, and the lingering traces of the nightmare that shocked Mischa awake take their toll and she begins to scurry faster towards her brother's door. Once there, she raises her right hand and taps against the heavy wood.

"It's us," she calls out. "Mischa and Vytautas."

She hears her brother laugh from behind the door. "Who else could it be? Come in, you little nocturnal beasts."

Mischa enters, shutting the door behind her. As always, her brother's room is impeccably clean. Rows of books line the wall opposite his bed. She's tried to find something of interest in their number countless times, but the only ones with pictures are old medical or botanical diagrams meant more to explain than excite. His art supplies are organized elegantly on his desk - all dark pencils, charcoal, and sepia-colored ink. In contrast, her desk and more than a few of her smocks have several permanent watercolor stains. His daemon, Aušrinė, currently in the form of a beautiful swan, sits roosted at the foot of his bed, calmly and gracefully preening the feathers of one outstretched wing.

In all, there is no evidence whatsoever that Hannibal had ever even been a child, at least in the sense that Mischa understands her own childhood. No stray socks that fail to land in the laundry hamper, no loveworn stuffed animals, and almost certainly no nightmares.

Just thinking about the nightmare causes her eyes to begin to water again. Vytautas ruffles his feathers and presses closer to her cheek in a small attempt to comfort her.

Hannibal frowns and rises from his desk. “Mischa, is something wrong?”

“I-” she begins before faltering. She sniffles, burying her face in her hands. “I had a bad dream!”

She hears Hannibal close the distance between them and feels his warmth as he embraces her. He makes a few shushing and soothing sounds as she sobs inelegantly into his shoulder.

“Would you like to tell me about it?” he asks after she begins to call down. She shakes her head. “Very well. Is the nightmare why you’re up so early?”

Mischa nods. “Vytautas and I couldn’t go back to sleep,” she says. “I didn’t want to just come in and cry like a baby.”

“Everyone gets scared by trivial things and needs to let it out from time to time, Mischa.”

“You don’t,” the girl grumbles.

Hannibal’s lips curl up very slightly at each end. It should be a smile, but Mischa has seen the expression before and Vytautas has told her that he isn’t sure that it qualifies. He says he isn’t sure what it *is* - just what it *isn’t*.

“Most people, then,” he says. He releases her from the hug and stands, observing her curiously as she wanders over to his desk to fiddle with some of his art supplies.

“Vytautas said that if it’s after midnight, it’s your birthday,” Mischa says as she starts to pose her brother’s small wooden artist’s mannequin. “Even if the sun isn’t up yet, it counts as a new day. Is that true?”

“Yes, it’s true. It’s very clever of you to realize that, Mischa. Most children your age wouldn’t be able to grasp something like that about the nature of time.”

Mischa turns her head and gives him a funny look. “Vytautas knew it, not me.”

Hannibal laughs. “Though your understanding of daemons is still somewhat lacking.”

Mischa purses her lips into a comically over-exaggerated pout and turns her head away from him. “If you’re going to be mean, maybe I won’t wish you happy birthday after all!”

“Ah, well, I can’t have that,” Hannibal says as he moves to sit on the edge of his bed. Aušrinė changes into the form of a white dove and flutters to perch on top of Hannibal’s ash blond head. A literal peace offering. He presses his right hand over his heart and extends his left towards Mischa. “I apologize for my rudeness.”

Surprise chases away the irritation from Mischa’s face when she catches Aušrinė’s transformation out of the corner of her eye. She turns back to Hannibal, gazing up at his daemon. “She isn’t settled? Isn’t she supposed to settle on your birthday?” She blinks in

confusion, wide, burgundy eyes lowering to meet her brother's. "And you don't smell any different either."

"It's true that daemons always settle on one's birthday, and always at the same time that the body presents. But in most cases that doesn't happen until someone's eighteenth birthday. I'm only sixteen."

"Before Mama and Papa died, they told me that you always did everything early. Like reading before you were three. But not this?"

Hannibal shrugs. "Evidently not even I can do *everything* ahead of schedule."

Mischa gives a little hum and tilts her head. She lifts her hand to her shoulder. Vytautas climbs onto her fingers and she gazes into his enormous hazel eyes. "Eighteen years old, huh? That's such a long time from now! It'll be forever before finally Vytautas settles."

"Thirteen years is hardly 'forever'," Hannibal says, laughing. "The time will go by faster than you think. When you look back, it will be as if all that time - all that life you'll live in the next thirteen years - had happened in an instant. You should cherish it while it's still in front of you instead of behind you."

Mischa tries to imagine what Vytautas will be once he has settled. Will he be an owl like he is now? It would be nice to still be able to feel the sensation of flying while her feet are still planted on the ground. But then, if she wanted to swim across a large pond or lake, how would they accomplish that without the crippling pain of pulling their Tether too tight? Perhaps Vytautas could flutter overhead while she swam, but the idea of bobbing around in water while still feeling the wind through Vytautas's wings is already giving her vertigo.

She just hopes he doesn't end up being some slimy slug or some chittering insect - something that would only feel at home deep in the dark woods that surround the estate.

The woods.

We should tell him about the dream, Vytautas urges through their Tether. *Talking about it will help us feel better.*

Mischa bites the bottom of her lip and lowers her brow in a combination of concentration and worry. She hesitates for a moment, thinking about telling Vytautas no or trying to drop the matter altogether, but it doesn't take her too long to heed his suggestion.

"I think I'm ready to tell you about my nightmare."

Hannibal shifts to balance his elbows on his thighs and clasp his hands together. Mischa can feel his attention on her, almost like the sensation of suddenly walking through a cold mist. "Go on," he urges.

"I was standing in front of my window. I wasn't doing anything… just standing and looking out at the woods. Then, these lights started to come out of the forest and move down the path towards the castle. They were really small, but maybe they were just really far away. And

they moved from side to side, side to side. Slowly. Swaying. It was just these five lights coming towards us, and I didn't know what they were or what they wanted," Mischa says.

Below them, on the first floor, the first heavy boot lands on the first step of the stairs. Even with Hannibal's highly acute senses, he is too far away and too caught up in his sister's story to hear the sounds as the men head up the stairs. They move up slowly but surely, their lanterns swaying from side to side. By the time they reach the top of the stairs, their leader motions for them to slow down and minimize their noise. In the dim light of his lantern, the door of a child's room is open.

They proceed down the hall.

Back in Hannibal's room, Mischa swallows heavily and continues, "I know it doesn't sound scary, but it was. It was the scariest thing I've ever seen. When I woke up, I was sitting straight up in my bed and crying, and the first thing I saw was the window. Vytautas and I couldn't go back to sleep."

She wipes away a few stray tears from her eyes with her long sleeve. "It probably sounds silly."

Behind her, the knob on Hannibal's door starts to turn.

A Murder

Chapter Notes

> The first real chapter! Notes for the prologue can be found at my tumblr here. My goal is to post notes for the previous chapter on my tumblr the same day I plan on posting a new chapter here on AO3.
>
> The second chapter, An Unkindness, is complete but needs revision, and I want to get some progress made on chapter 3 before I post it. I'm aiming for around 2 weeks from now, since I might not have any time to work on it while I'm in Toronto for FannibalFest.
>
> Enjoy!

“Have any of you seen someone die right in front of you?” Will Graham asks his class. The body of a dead woman, covered in blood and the barely-visible golden gleam of residual Dust, reflects off of his glasses from the overhead display.

Despite the dim lighting, he can see some of the trainees looking around at each other with uncertainty. “It isn’t a hypothetical question this time,” Will continues. “If none of you are able or willing to discuss the matter, I can refer to my own experience.”

A young man with dark auburn hair raises his hand. Even sitting, Will can tell that he is tall and broadly built - an Alpha. His lemur daemon sits on his left shoulder with her long striped tail trailing behind his neck and down the other shoulder. He’s the same young man who, in previous classes, has been exceptionally eager to volunteer his own opinions and theories but never asks questions or seeks clarification. Will has made it a point of curmudgeonly pride to not remember his name.

“Who was it and how did they die?”

“My grandfather,” the trainee replies. “Cancer.”

Will nods. He can feel the lemur’s huge amber eyes staring unblinking at the lump in his shirt pocket. Objecting to the attempted scrutiny, Sabine curls further in on herself against his chest.

“What happened when he died?”

“The family had been expecting it for a while, so we had plenty of time to prepare for it when it happened. It was in a hospice that was operated by the church where he had served as a pastor for over forty years. When it was clear that he wasn’t going to last the night, his friends, family, and members of his congregation gathered around him and just… sang

hymns, said prayers, told stories, and waited for it to happen. Eventually he fell asleep. We knew it was over when his daemon turned to Dust and drifted out the open window," the trainee says, his voice rising and falling with the practiced and perfected beat of someone who has told a sad story dozens of times. "The way the Dust swept out on the night wind… even though it was sad, it was almost beautiful."

"How old were you?"

"Only ten."

Will glances down at this class list until he finds the note he was looking for. *Jeffries, Robert G. (Annoying - Don't Bother)* "Thank you for sharing, Mr. Jeffries," he says. "A story as old as life and death itself: the body and daemon in absolutely perfect sync as their life ends. The brain dies. The daemon turns to Dust. The beautiful natural order of things."

He presses a button on his overhead remote. The image of the dead woman switches to that of a dead man. His eyes are open and vacant, and his formerly white shirt is soaked dark red with blood from the bullet hole over his heart. "There's evidence that that is precisely what happened with Mr. Marlow," Will says. "Minus the peaceful passing."

"If only Mrs. Marlow were so lucky." He clicks the button again and the image changes to side-by-side pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Marlow.

"Given the right conditions, the body can live up to an hour after their daemon has already dispersed," Will says. "And even then, an hour is very extreme. You really only see in apocryphal tales of esoteric monks who have pushed the limits of the bonds with their daemons for spiritual purposes. In actual scientific studies of… let's say unconventional execution practices, it's rare to see the body last longer than ten minutes, let alone half an hour. A rarity within a rarity. It's most common that a person whose daemon has been killed will die of shock seconds after."

"But it is possible. And it happened to Sophia Marlow. How do we know this?"

He watches or a few moments while the trainees stare up at the picture, looking for the evidence that Will insists is present. When Jeffries opens his mouth to chime in, Will continues, "Let's look at the pictures taken of the bodies using a Rusakov filter on the crime scene camera."

He clicks the remote. The new image on the overhead is from the same angle and distance from the bodies as the previous, but with a dark sapphire cast. A few small flecks of gold appear on Mr. Marlow's body, nearly invisible. Mrs. Marlow, in contrast, has a much denser spray of gold clustered over her body, mostly concentrated over her face and heart. It's only a fraction of the amount of Dust that appears on the body of a living person when photographed using a Rusakov filter, but it is certainly more than should appear on a corpse.

"When the body dies in tandem with the daemon, you have a typical Dust reaction as seen here with Mr. Marlow," Will says, using a laser pointer to outline the male Beta's body. He trails the laser over to Mrs. Marlow, circling the golden glow over her heart. "When the daemon is killed and the body lingers, the Dust that used to make up the daemon clings to the

body instead of immediately dispersing into the atmosphere. Even hours after the body has finally died, an unusually high level of Dust remains. The process is not yet fully understood, but if I had to guess… I'd call it horror and trauma played out on a subatomic level."

"This is why innovations like the Rusakov filter are vital for the evolution of crime scene analysis," Will states. "Without it, we would have had no way of knowing the details of what was inflicted on Mrs. Marlow. Because we *do* know, we have information on how this killer thinks and what he wants. This time, he got lucky. He wanted to inflict a level of suffering and terror that none of us can truly, fully comprehend until we have seen our own daemon - our spirit itself - destroyed in front of us. Given the post-mortem treatment and marks on Mrs. Marlow's body, he must have known what he had accomplished and he must have been *elated*. He will try to replicate it. Again. And again. And again. Until he has perfected his design."

He should have known that the taboo wouldn't apply to him. It's supposed to be debilitating for both the perpetrator and the victim. But here he stands, one strong fist wrapped around the pathetic slow loris's neck and the other around its middle. He feels nothing. The woman, paralyzed with the fear and strangulation of her daemon, lies slumped at the bottom of her stairs, making guttural croaking sounds. He twists his hands. The Dust that slips through his fingers is surprisingly warm. The woman slumps, but her chest rises and falls in stuttering rhythm. A part of her is still there, behind her eyes. He did it. The thrill is beyond words. He walks toward her.

Cold sweat starts to prickle above Will's brows and his stomach churns. He clears his throat. "Next week we will discuss the kind of mindset that would see what it unleashed on the Marlows as a… a victory," he says, removing a piece of cloth from his pants pocket and nervously wiping at his glasses. "Class dismissed."

He slips the glasses back over his eyes. With his barrier back in place, he begins to feel the darkness of his imagined victory fading. Looking up, he sees Jeffries preparing to leave with the other trainees. "Mr. Jeffries," he calls out. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Jeffries grins and waves off a few of his fellow trainees, telling them that he will meet up with them later. He's all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed - literally, given the proud way his daemon has puffed up her tail. The young man reeks of Alpha arrogance and ease, certain that Will has summoned him to praise him for his candor and for sharing a difficult moment of his life. Will can practically taste his eagerness at the back of his throat, sour and curdled.

"Never lie in my class again," Will says as he stuffs his notes into his bag. Even though he is refusing to look at Jeffries, he can sense the shock coming off the young man.

"I… I'm sorry?"

"Apology accepted, but this is your only warning. Do it again and I will report you to the higher-ups. They aren't too thrilled when a possible future FBI agent demonstrates a willingness to exaggerate the truth for drama. Even if they don't kick you out, if your indiscretions as a trainee come out, that's how you lose a high-profile case to the court of public opinion twenty years down the line."

“No, I… uh, I mean… why do you think I lied?”

Will finally looks at him, though he still will not meet the trainee’s eyes. The young man looks truly shaken and stricken by Will’s words. Almost assuredly a lie borne out of a need to be considered impressive and praiseworthy, then. A thin and brittle mask of confidence that Will has just cracked. If he manages to learn from this, he will most likely remain harmless, albeit probably still very, very annoying to Will personally.

“You said your grandfather, a former pastor, passed away in a hospice run by his church. It’s a core tenet of all branches of modern Christianity that Dust is the physical embodiment of original sin. That when the body dies and the daemon dissipates, the Dust left behind is the sin cleansed from the body, now free to go out and infect others with temptation and vice. A religious institution would never allow an unsettled child to be exposed to that much rogue sin lest it cling to you and infect you like a parasite,” Will says. “That’s all nonsense, of course. Superstition. I believe you that your grandfather died when you were ten, and that he died in a religious hospice. But you weren’t present for his passing.”

As Will speaks, he notices Jeffries’s face grow increasingly pale. His daemon hunkers down, trying to make herself smaller and less noticeable as she tries to partially hide herself behind her human’s neck. The trainee’s eyes aren’t resting on Will, but rather on something that seems to be over his shoulder.

“Am I interrupting something?” a strong voice asks from behind Will.

Will gives a small jolt of surprise at the unexpected voice. He turns to see Jack Crawford, the head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit, heading toward him. Themis, his fawn-colored Kangal Dog daemon, strides confidently at his side. He has only met Jack once, in the form of a brief and awkward argument at the unveiling of the so-called Evil Minds Research Museum in the Behavioral Sciences division, and Will is pretty sure that he must have made a very nasty impression.

“N-no sir, Agent Crawford!” Jeffries replies, trying to keep his voice from shaking and not particularly succeeding.

Seeing the dread and mortification in Jeffries’s eyes over the prospect of having his indiscretion revealed in front of someone he clearly looks up to, Will decides to take pity on him. “No, we were just finishing up,” Will says. “You can go, Jeffries.”

“I-I’ll remember your advice, Mr. Graham,” Jeffries says. He grins nervously at Jack. “And I look forward to meeting you again, Agent Crawford. I really respect your work.”

Jack nods but says nothing else to Jeffries, who gratefully takes the opportunity to make a hasty retreat. Once the trainee has left, Jack turns his full attention to Will, a knowing glimmer in his eye. “That was an interesting lecture.”

“How long were you watching?”

“I started lurking in the doorway right around the time you put up the Rusakov-filtered pictures.”

Will grunts. “Then are you talking about my take on the Marlow murders or the fact that I almost made one of your recruits cry?”

Jack laughs, a powerful, lively, and full-bodied sound. Will isn’t sure if he himself has ever been that loud in his entire life. “Sometimes it’s the overeager twerps that go on to be some of the best agents we have. You just have to put the fear of God in them.”

Will makes an unconvinced noise.

“Hey, I’m here, aren’t I?” Jack asks, grinning. “I was probably the biggest twerp of all when I was that kid’s age.”

“Twerp or not, I find it hard to believe that someone as busy and important as you has the time or inclination to drop in on the tail end of a class for no reason,” Will says, folding his arms and taking care to avoid disturbing his daemon in his pocket. “Is there something I can help you with, Jack?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.”

*****

A few minutes later, Will stands in Agent Crawford’s office, staring at a set of pictures of eight very similar looking girls. Long, dark hair. Blue eyes. Pale skin. Pretty, in a very Midwestern girl-next-door sort of way. And strangest of all, all of their daemons have visible irregularities ranging from melanism to striking size variance.

“I thought there were seven disappearances,” Will says.

Jack strides up to stand beside him in front of the pictures. “We flagged the eighth only about half an hour ago. Elise Nichols, 19, freshman at St. Cloud State on the Mississippi,” he says, indicating one of the girls and her albino crow daemon. “She’s only been missing for a little over 48 hours.“

“Their dynamics?”

“Four Betas, three Omegas, and an Alpha. Elise is one of the Betas. No apparent pattern when it comes to dynamics We don’t think that it's part of his criteria.”

“That’s rare,” Will mumbles, staring harder at the pictures. “The sexual dynamic is usually a very high priority when a killer has a type. It’s almost always one of two things. The first: they already killed the target of their obsession and are trying to relive that feeling. The second: their ultimate target is still alive but they feel the need to build up to and perfect their design before they implement it. Either way, they demand high specificity to a rigid pattern.”

“Any idea which type we’re dealing with here?”

Will shakes his head. “I won’t know for sure until I can get further into his head,” he says. “But there’s definitely something here when it comes to all the irregular daemons. Do any of them have the most common irregularity?”

“No. Their daemons are all male.”

“‘Are?’” Will asks.

Jack sighs and shrugs. “No sign of blood or tissue when the girls’ homes were searched. No signs of a struggle at any of their last known whereabouts. No sign of suspicious levels of Dust when their homes, apartments, or dorms were examined using Rusakov filters, just in case we had a situation on our hands like your Marlow murders. The families want us to treat this as kidnappings with the potential to bring some or all off the girls home safe.”

“The parents are going to be very disappointed. They’re all dead, or most of them are. No way he’s got all eight locked up in a dungeon somewhere unless he's working with others. With stranger abductions, that’s feasible at three, max. Otherwise you run the risk of being overpowered by your own victims. Rookie stuff,” Will says dryly. He glances down at Jack’s daemon, wondering if it’s distaste he sees in her sharp brown eyes. He pushes his glasses up to rub tiredly at the bridge of his nose. “Why do you want me on this case, Jack? You’ve got Alana Bloom. She does what I do without the risk of pissing off over half a dozen mourning families.”

“Alana Bloom is a brilliant colleague, but you know for a fact that she doesn’t do what you do. And...”

The word hangs heavily in the air for a moment. Will shoots a quick side glance at Jack. He can see the cogs whirring behind the Special Agent’s eyes, trying to find the best words. Will sees them click into place before Jack has a chance to utter them. He scowls.

“And Alana Bloom has a peacock daemon with textbook-perfect coloring and size,” Will spits. “You read my file and picked me because Sabine is irregular twice over.”

“Come on, Will-”

“No, Jack, you don’t understand. I don’t appreciate being a token. I was the token Omega in the New Orleans PD, and I still get some of that garbage here. I feel that hot, rancid breath of expectation and assumption against the short hairs on the back off my neck far more than I’d like.”

Jack holds up his hands in a placating gesture, but Themis stands and puffs out her chest, her tail wagging stiffly behind her. Put together, the two form one of the most intense mixed-signals Will has ever seen in his life.

“I just think you would bring a very useful insight that’s lacking in my team,” Jack explains with exaggerated patience. “That’s on top of your stellar profiling work.”

He lowers his arms, folding them across his broad chest. His expression turns more stern. “Besides, you think I don’t understand anything about tokenism? Do you think I got where I am without enduring more than my fair share of backwards bullshit? As long as we’re lecturing each other on what we do or do not understand, I strongly suggest you thicken up your hide.”

Will swallows, nodding tightly. “I apologize. I just got… I get riled up sometimes. When it’s about Sabine.”

Jack relaxes slightly. “Those are my cards on the table, Will. Eight missing girls with the promise of more unless we get this guy. If I could bring him in single-handed without getting you involved, I would. But that is not an option, and I need your help.”

Will takes in a long breath that hisses through his teeth. “Okay.”

“Good,” Jack says, clapping his hand companionably on Will’s shoulder. “We’re heading out ASAP. My team is already en route to rendezvous with the local police. We’ll join them at the Nichols’ place.”

Will nods again, keeping his eyes on the pictures of the girls. He isn’t sure if it’s to motivate or distract.

“Now…” Jack continues, his voice lowered and measured. Even without looking at him, Will can feel the Alpha’s eyes burning into the pocket where he keeps Sabine. “We should probably have a proper introduction, since we’ll be working together. You’ve already seen my Themis. She’s hard to avoid. It only seems fair that I get a good look at your Sabine.”

“She’s been out for around five minutes. She wanted a better look at the girls. Wanted to try to soak in the pattern,” Will states. “She’s easier to see than you’d think when she’s skulking around. You just have to know where to look.”

Sabine swivels one of her eyes to look at Jack, and Will can feel it through their Tether when Jack finally notices the spot of black against Will’s red-and-white plaid shirt. She keeps her other eye on the pictures of the girls, but the reds and whites across her skin ripple, changing to the light salmon pink of her resting color. At around six inches from the tip of her snout to the uncurled end of her tail, Sabine is an unusually small female panther chameleon with a breadth and control of color that should simply be impossible, even for a daemon.

“Amazing,” Jack breathes. “With a color range like that, she could look like anything at all.”

Black spots flare up and down Sabine’s back and the daemon skitters across Will’s front to return to the pocket.

“Yeah,” Will sighs. “She could.”

*****

The first thing Will notices about the Nichols’ house is its construction. Although only one floor, the building itself is large enough that a hunch starts to settle at the back of his mind before Jack even parks their rental car. Once they are out, he sees further evidence: instead of a single front door, there is a set of large wooden double doors that together make for an entrance that is easily over six feet wide.

“Does one of the parents have a large daemon?” Will asks as he follows Jack to the entrance. The Special Agent flashes his credentials to the Duluth PD officers standing guard on the

lawn. They nod and step aside, allowing Will and Jack in without missing a beat.

“The mother. A grizzly.”

“And the other girls?”

“Half and half. Four have at least one parent with a daemon larger than an average human being while the other four don’t.”

Will thinks back to the pictures of the girls. The largest daemon out of the group was Penelope Cohen’s melanistic lynx. None of the girls themselves would have required the special large construction needed to accommodate certain daemons.

“I’d like a comprehensive list of every residence that the girls could have spent a significant amount of time in. Dorms, apartments, parents’ homes, significant others’ residences,” Will says as Jack guides him into the dining room. “I think there’s going to be a pattern.”

There’s a strange scratch on the moulding at the top of the door leading into the dining room. He can’t be completely sure without a stepladder to allow him a closer look, but it seems like a small scuff where some of the white paint was rubbed off. Will stops, gazing up at it curiously, but he doesn’t have enough time to think too much about it before Jack calls him to come along into the dining room.

To Will’s dismay, Elise Nichols’s parents are seated at the dining room table answering questions from an FBI agent. The parents sit huddled together, along with their daemons. Elise’s mother has her hand gently resting on one of the soft ears of her mate’s Scottish Fold daemon while her father grips a handful of fur at the shoulder of his mate’s grizzly. Even though touching a mate’s daemon isn’t considered taboo in the same way touching a stranger’s is, it’s still an incredibly intimate and private thing, and the fact that this extreme is the only thing they can cling to right now in this moment of trauma and panic makes Will’s stomach sink. He turns away from them, sweat prickling at the back of his neck.

He’s grateful that Jack takes the lead in speaking with the parents, leaving him to skulk around the room unintroduced and mostly unnoticed. He listens in on the conversation just enough to absorb the pertinent information while he has a closer look at the story of the Nichols’ life as told through their decorations. They’re a picture-taking and picture-displaying family, something Will has very little personal experience with.

Through the pictures, he sees the entire span of Elise’s life. In the last, she is cradled in her mother’s arms, a newborn baby with the typical hazy, golden glow of her still-unformed daemon floating by her sleeping face. In the last, she smiles in her high school graduation gown, her albino crow daemon perched atop her mortarboard. Between the two images are countless snapshots of girlhood fully lived: missing baby teeth, family vacations, two different prom dates, holding up blue ribbons in several different youth gardening competitions. An only child. Adored, now gone.

Will shudders, closing his eyes and pinching at the bridge of his nose. When he opens his eyes, he glances out the large window that shows the Nichols’ expansive backyard. In keeping with all the gardening award pictures, the yard is a beautiful and beloved work of art.

Violets, blue and maroon lupines, white and pink foxgloves, and a variety of pansies all bloom in clearly defined plots.

But the more Will looks, the more he begins to see something strange about the flowers. A few of the lupines seem shorter than their brethren, and there are some small patchy areas that make for conspicuous absences given how structured and well-kept the rest of the garden is. He steps closer to the window, taking in more of the yard.

There is a small white shed at the far end of the yard where the fence separates the highly cultivated world of the Nichols' garden from a large clearing that leads up to the untamed woods beyond the property. A wooden trellis arch covered in heavy tendrils of Japanese wisteria stands over the entrance to the shed. A plaque at the top of the arch, partially obscured by the wisteria, reads "ELISE'S BUTTERFLY GARDEN".

Just like the moulding above the door, there is a strange scratch at the very bottom of the sign, small enough that Will might not have noticed it if the wisteria in the same place weren't also clearly disturbed. .A single petal from one of the pansies sits alone and lonely just before the shed door.

Will's blood freezes.

"Did Elise have a gardening competition coming up?" he blurts, keeping his gaze fixed on the yard.

He must have interrupted the conversation Jack was having with the Nichols at an awkward spot, because nobody immediately answers him. When Mrs. Nichols finally responds, her voice is raw from exhaustion. "N-no, not anything immediate. Her next one will be in a few weeks."

"So she wouldn't be looking to cut any of the flowers?"

"No," Mr. Nichols replies. "It's too early in the season for that."

Will hears the sound of short claws against hardwood as Themis trots over to join him at the window. Jack joins her shortly thereafter, both standing on opposite sides of Will as they look out into the yard as well. "Do you know if the local cops checked the shed?" Will asks Jack in a low voice.

"Yeah, when the missing person's report first came in," Jack replies. "The pictures they took of the property as a potential crime scene didn't show anything amiss in the house or the shed. No footprints, fingerprints, blood… nothing."

"And the flowers?"

"All in order."

Will swallows the lump that has risen in his throat. Feeling the intense gazes from the Nichols parents and the local police on his back, he turns to look at them over his shoulder.

"He took her from here. And he came back."

*****

The body of Elise Nichols lies pale and cold atop a long gardening table inside the little shed. She is still in her white nightgown, and the pallor of her skin suggests that she has been dead for around as long as she has been officially missing. Purple bruises ring her neck, but she looks otherwise peaceful and unharmed. An amateur bouquet of flowers from her own garden lie atop her chest with her hands positioned as if she is clutching them. A floral offering to the dead.

Will can hear the Nichols parents wailing outside the shed.

"Can you… get them further away?" he asks Jack, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "It's hard to think. Sabine and I like to have privacy."

"I'll help the police take them inside and try to get them calmed down a little. If I can," Jack says somberly. "Then I'll come back and guard the door until you're ready to talk."

Will nods and watches Jack leave with Themis, shutting the door behind them. He turns his attention back to Elise.

Sabine crawls out of his pocket and skitters down his body and out onto the floor of the shed. "His daemon is tall," she says, her voice quiet and raspy with infrequent use. "Or can be. At least a foot taller than you. Big enough to leave those scuffs."

"And irregular in some way. Might be the size, making it bigger than usual. Might be something else."

"Yes," Sabine hisses. "This is… personal."

"And the girls?"

Sabine laughs bitterly, a sound like sandpaper swept against unvarnished wood. "Even more personal."

Will sighs. "Ready?"

"I've been waiting for *you*."

Together, they shut their eyes. Their pendulum swings.

When Will opens his eyes, his view of the world has changed entirely. The yellows of the pansies and the pinks of the foxgloves and the violet of the bruises around Elise Nichols' neck are all saturated and bolder. The light and color that defines everything around him is richer and more textured than when he looks at the world through his own eyes. His pendulum swings again, erasing the flowers and the injuries to Elise's neck. Again, and the shed changes to the inside of the girl's room, recreated from photos Jack had shared with him on the flight. Elise lies in bed, alive and dreaming. Her daemon roosts in a nest of charming quilting scraps in a specialty-made nook at the top of her headboard.

Will stares down at the girl. His hand itches with the desire to reach down and gently cup her face, but he fights it down, knowing it would give him away. He can tell that the urge doesn't immediately register in his mind as sexual or fetishistic. It's love - it's adoration - but there is nonetheless a rusty, corrosive feel to it.

As he stands beside the bed, Will sees a shadow rise up from the floor beside him. It contorts and writhes, expands and twists until it looms beside him, enormous and indistinct in its form. Although monstrous and eerie, he feels no fear when he sees it. Why would he fear his own daemon?

Sabine tries out a few shapes that could be tall enough to make the strange smudges on the door frame and the sign on the potting shed. With Elise's mother as a baseline, his daemon cannot be too much wider than a grizzly, but must certainly be taller.

With still too many options in play, Sabine remains a largely amorphous shape looming beside him. Together, they set their sights on the slumbering crow daemon. Once they make their move, Elise and her crow may startle awake. They will need to be dealt with simultaneously.

Will takes in a deep breath and holds it. His heart beats calmly and steadily in his chest. For a moment, everything is still.

The moment he grabs Elise Nichols' throat in his hands, Sabine rears up above them and slams into Elise's daemon. The crow shrieks and tries to peck at his assailant, but Sabine simply overpowers and traps him. Elise, shocked awake but without air, succumbs to unconsciousness quickly. Her crow, now quiet, goes limp against Sabine. He keeps up the pressure for minutes, muscles burning and his breath fire in his chest.

The Dust of Elise Nichols's daemon glimmers in the moonlight as it disperses into the air.

Will's chest heaves as he slowly loosens his grip on the girl's throat. He leans back and shakes with the exertion and adrenaline coursing through his veins. As he catches his breath, he looks down at the girl's face. If it weren't for the eerie stillness of her body and the tell-tale marks on her neck, she could easily pass as alive.

Grief and elation thrum in Will's chest, a triumphant and terrible beast beating behind his sternum. "This is my design," he whispers.

Elise's eyes roll open and pin him with a wide, bloodshot stare. "You're Will Graham."

Will reels back, stunned and thrashing. Sabine bolts and skitters beneath the low shelf attached to the bottom of the table. It takes him a few seconds of raw panic to realize that he is truly himself again, no longer seeing through the eyes of the person who left Elise Nichols here with her flowers.

An Alpha woman stands at the doorway of the shed, staring at him with interest in her dark eyes. Her river otter daemon slinks around her feet and into the shed, his whiskers twitching with curiosity. He sniffs at the crack between the floor of the shed and the shelf, and Will can

sense Sabine pushing herself further and further back towards the wall that the table rests against.

Cornered, they think simultaneously. Sweat beads on Will's forehead and at the back of his neck, and he finds himself nervously reaching up to wipe the moisture away.

"Did, uh - did you say something? Just now?" he asks.

"Yeah," the woman replies, drawing out the word with confusion. "I said 'You're Will Graham'. You are, right?"

"Ah… yes. That's me."

She grins and looks over her shoulder out into the garden. "Hey, Pandas! Get your butts over here! The new agent working with us is Will Graham!"

"Stop calling us that!" calls a male voice from behind her.

"I like it!" insists another, followed by some quieter squabbling between the two that Will can't really make out.

"I'm, um, I'm not an agent," Will murmurs, gazing down with discomfort as the otter continues to sniff around for Sabine.

The woman snaps her head back to face him, surprise and curiosity coloring her features. "You're not?"

"Didn't get through the screening," Will says. "I'm just a teacher."

Before the woman can ask the intrusive question that is clearly percolating behind her curious eyes, two Beta men come up behind her at the entrance of the shed. One is middle-aged with short, light hair and a raccoon daemon clutching his back like a comical backpack. The other is a few years younger with dark hair and a tired, dubious look in his eyes. His red panda daemon peers at Will from behind her human's legs.

"I'm Beverly Katz, and that's Hartwin," the woman says as her daemon lopes back to her side. A fraction of the clawing tension that had risen in Will drains out of him. He still feel trapped at this unwanted and intense scrutiny, but at least Sabine doesn't have another daemon nearly breathing down her neck. "And these are the Pandas: Jimmy Price and Minerva, and Brian Zeller and Líadan."

"The Pandas?" Will asks weakly.

Price grins and points to Líadan. "Red panda," he says, and then points to his own daemon. "Trash panda. It's nice to meet you, by the way. Your monograph on time of death based on the rate of residual Dust decay was fascinating! Are you here to consult on that?"

Will scowls at the ground. "No, I don't think that's why Jack wanted me brought on."

He doesn't add anything else to that, but he can feel Katz and Price's expectant gazes on him. He feels Zeller's irritation and skepticism too, but he tries to put it out of mind.

They don't seem to want to take awkward silence as an answer, Sabine grumbles through the Tether. *I'll come out.*

Will sighs as his daemon crawls out from beneath the low shelf. Her skin is bright red with black mottling, her typical stress and warning coloring. "All the victims are irregular," he says as Sabine darts up the fabric of his pants and up onto his grey blazer. Faster and with a control that would not be possible for a regular chameleon, her reds and blacks fade to grey and she nearly disappears against the fabric. "They don't make them much more irregular than Sabine."

"Oh, wow!" Price exclaims. "A panther chameleon! Normally they're much bigger that. And her coloring! Neat!"

"Ugh, reptiles. They're always such cold-blooded weirdos," Zeller grumbles. Katz elbows her teammate in the ribs and hisses something to him about stereotypes. Zeller rolls his eyes and hisses back about how some stereotypes are based on repeated, observable data.

While they squabble, Price grins at Will with the tight, awkward smile that a child gives to his friend while his parents argue in the front seat on the drive to soccer practice.

Will's salvation comes in the form of Jack Crawford, voice bellowing from half a yard away and getting closer all the time. "Hey! I told you to all to steer clear of the shed!"

Price and Zeller scramble out of Jack's way, talking over each other with excuses. Katz, on the other hand, stands her ground. "You know that stuff we found around her wounds before you let the new guy in? One of the local cops knew exactly what it was. He's an avid hunter and recognized it right away. It's antler velvet. I wanted to see if I could find more of it."

"You still weren't supposed to enter without my express permission."

"You know, some people think antler velvet has healing properties," Price adds merrily. "There's a whole industry for it in some places. It's chock full of growth hormones."

Zeller frowns. "He wanted to heal her? Why would he do that after killing her?"

"It's an apology," Will murmurs, mostly to himself.

"Shoving some antler crud into the holes where he gored her after death is a pretty sorry apology."

"Something about her changed his method," Will says, completely ignoring Zeller. "He strangled her in her bed. Took the body. She was bled out. But it doesn't feel fetishistic, doesn't feel… cruel. It's sacred. It should have gone according to the ritual he's got in his head, but something threw a wrench in it."

"Before we left Quantico, you said that this killer was either trying to relive something or build up to it," Jack says. "Do you think this was his culmination? It would explain why this

one is so different from the rest."

"I don't…" Will begins before falling silent. He worries at his bottom lip in thought. With a sting of pain, he realizes that his right cuspid has broken the skin of his lower lip. He hisses in pain and reaches up to swipe the back of his hand over his mouth. "I don't know, Jack. I don't know."

When he pulls his hand away, a small smear of blood and saliva clings to the back of his hand. He glances up and catches Jack's eye for just a fraction of a second. In that moment, he sees doubt, frustration, anger, concern, and something else that Will can't quite place - something not quite fully formed, like the tiny bubbles at the bottom of a pot on the verge of boiling.

"Anyone have any hand sanitizer?" he mutters.

*****

Will's lip still aches two days later as he tries to look at anything but Elise Nichols' body laid out on one of the autopsy tables. In the past 48 hours he has been conscripted to work the field for a serial killer case, flown to Minnesota, found the body of a teenage girl, watched a family completely fall apart, flown back to Quantico, found a new dog, failed to sleep, and tried to go about his regular teaching schedule as if any of this was in any way normal. He feels he has earned the right to skulk around the periphery of the examination room now that the body has been cleared for autopsy.

As Jack and his forensics team discuss the findings, Will lets Sabine do much of the listening for him. She hangs on every word as the team discusses the strange metal filings found in the girl's bedding, the antler velvet placed in her wounds, and - most importantly - the fact that her liver had been removed and then returned to her dead body.

Sabine lurches in his pocket as the revelation hits them.

"She wasn't his main target," Will says. "You crave an apple. A specific type. You find one, and you pick it. But you discover there's already a worm in it."

"What do you mean?" Jack asks.

Will looks over to them briefly and catches Zeller looking at him as in suspicion. He looks away again before responding, "Something that couldn't be detected from just looking at her. Something hidden in the meat."

"We found a small growth on the liver," Zeller states. "Primary liver cancer. Probably still stage one."

Will swallows heavily. "Not, uh… not something you'd want to eat."

"He's eating them?" Price whispers, his eyes wide.

"This is good!" Zeller exclaims. When everyone except for Will stares at him in incredulity, he brings up his hands in defense. "I mean, not *good* good in the traditional sense, but… this

will help us narrow it down. He's a hunter, which is how he got the antler velvet. Put that together with the fact that he's eating them, and it means the killer's daemon has to be a predator."

That actually makes Will burst into laughter. He tries to corral his response back when all those eyes turn to him, but it takes him longer than he would like. Zeller glowers at him the whole time he takes to recover.

"Seems like I said something funny."

"It doesn't follow," Will says. "Just… what did you eat for lunch today?"

"Excuse me?"

"Just humor me."

Zeller does not answer immediately. Instead, he scowls at Will for a long moment before rolling his eyes and sighing. "Fine. Some leftover split pea and ham soup. Why?"

"Ah, yes. Ham. The natural diet of the red panda," Will says. "If the killer we are looking for must have a predator daemon because he is consuming the flesh of his victims, then you would have to primarily eat bamboo. I'd have to eat bugs, and that's not happening. It's true that many killers have predator daemons. But there are killers with rabbit daemons, killers with butterfly daemons, and so on. If we focus only on suspects with predator daemons, the risk is too high that he will slip through our fingers."

"Too bad he didn't ask me what I had for lunch," Price says, placing a friendly hand on Zeller's tensed shoulder. "I would have blown a hole in his argument by living up to the raccoon stereotype. I dropped my sandwich in a puddle but still ate it anyway because it only got a little damp. That's pretty much the polite society version of eating out of a dumpster."

"One anecdote wouldn't change my argument."

"Zeller does have a point, Will," Jack says, crossing his arms over his broad chest. Zeller lifts his chin at the unexpected defense. "I understand what he was saying there, even if it was a bit too broad. Statistically, it would make sense for us to include a predatory daemon in the profile. Most murderers do have carnivorous daemons."

"This one doesn't."

"And you still haven't told me why you think that in a way that fully satisfies me."

Will glowers at Jack's cheek, unable to make his eyes look any higher on the Special Agent's face. He wants to tell Jack that he just *knows* - and that that is good enough to work with. When the words for that peevish rebuttal get caught in his throat like the fur of a startled rabbit in a wire snare, the fight drains out of him like that same rabbit's blood when it tries and fails to gnaw its own foot off in desperation. Defeated by his own hesitation, he looks down and away.

"Well?" Jack prods.

Will shakes his head.

“We keep meat-eaters on the menu,” Jack says after a moment of heavy silence. “We focus on that, but we don’t rule out other options.”

“Fine,” Will mutters. Sabine sighs through the Tether. “We’ll see who's right.”

An Unkindness

Chapter Notes

> Second real chapter! Just like last time, notes for the previous chapter are up for those who are interested at my Tumblr. It's my goal to have all those notes be completely optional for readers, although I will be posting to my tumblr close to my self-imposed chapter deadlines so I can let people know when they can expect updates.
>
> The next chapter, A Pitying, is not yet complete. It's probably a little under halfway done, so I want to give myself another 2-ish weeks to work on it. Fingers crossed it'll be ready by then and I don't have to push it back. It's been useful for me to have the next chapter largely complete by the time I post a chapter, so hopefully I can get back to that.
>
> Thanks for reading, and enjoy!

“Do you know what the most common type of daemon is, doctor?” Franklyn Froideveaux asks between sniffles.

Hannibal blinks once at the little man before him. “Of course I do, Franklyn,” he replies. He reaches out for the tissue box on the table beside him, partially to offer something to stem the tide of mucus that Franklyn’s sniffling is scarcely keeping back, but also so he can catch a glimpse of his wristwatch. Five endless minutes left. “The majority of daemons are mammals. And of those mammals, a plurality comes from the family Canidae.”

“Dogs!” Franklyn exclaims mournfully. He takes the tissue from Hannibal’s fingers and almost immediately blows his nose into it.

A small, portly dog of indeterminate breed sits next to Franklyn’s chair. She has the body structure and dark, flat face of a pug, but her stubby tail does not curl back and she is covered in a coat of scraggly hair. Like her human, Franklyn’s daemon quivers with anxiety and desperation.

“I’m allergic to dogs,” Franklyn continues. He gives a small, pathetic chuckle. “I’m allergic to *myself*.”

“Dog daemons are not the same thing as the animal, Franklyn,” Hannibal says. “Daemons are composed of Dust. They leave behind no dander or other forms of waste, and therefore there has never been a reported case of a person who is allergic to his or her own daemon.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ve done extensive reading and research on psychological disorders between humans and their daemons. What you’re describing has never been documented.”

A small glimmer of hope ignites behind Franklyn's red and watery eyes. "Then… I'm unique?"

Hannibal takes a deep breath, steadies himself, and sighs in a way that he has crafted to sound purely incidental and not long-suffering. "No. Anything that seems to be an allergic reaction would be entirely psychosomatic."

Franklyn wilts. "Oh."

"You should look at your lot in life with a different perspective," Hannibal says. "Don't lament a lack of originality, but embrace the part of you that is similar with so many other people."

"But that's not what I want!"

"I thought you wanted friends. What better way than through the rock solid foundation of a connection shared with a similar soul?"

Franklyn's jaw works for a moment, but he can't seem to formulate a response. He sniffles again and rubs the soiled tissue over his reddened nose. "Well, yes, but not like that. Other people with dog daemons haven't liked me any more than people with different types of daemons. You have to impress people to make them like you, or… or at least interest them enough to bother remembering who you are."

Hannibal regards Franklyn with polite disinterest for a moment, listening as the clock in his office tick-tick-ticks away the endless seconds. It must look as if he is in deep thought pondering Franklyn's problems, because the Beta just sniffles and looks up at him expectantly.

"Then tell me, Franklyn: if you were able to go back in time to the day of your settling and you had a say in the form Francine took, what would you like her to be?" Hannibal finally replies.

"Oh! Uh," Franklyn stammers, his cheeks turning pink from being put on the spot. He looks down at his daemon, who gazes back up at him with bulging, puzzled eyes. Apparently finding nothing of use there, he looks around Hannibal's opulent office and eventually lands on something that makes him light up slightly.

"Well, honestly, something like your crow would be pretty-"

"She's a raven," Hannibal says curtly. Atop her perch, Aušrinė ruffles her dark feathers in indignation.

"Then, a raven!" Franklyn says, clutching the tissue beneath his chin. "I've always thought they were so regal - so… so enviable. A mark of culture and sophistication! Mysterious, clever, debonair..."

Hannibal gives a small, patronizing nod. He says nothing as he reaches for the notebook on the table beside the tissue box. In elegant penmanship, he writes, *F. Froideveaux displays*

strong lack of imagination. Seeks to ingratiate and imperfectly mimic others due to insecurity.

"This conversation has been illuminating, Franklyn," Hannibal lies. "I think I've unearthed some avenues we may investigate in order to work on your neuroticism."

The squat little dog's stubby tail begins to wag. "Y-you do?" Franklyn asks, voice quivering with disbelief.

"Absolutely," Hannibal says, rising from his seat. He smooths down the front of his suit before moving to stand beside Franklyn's chair. "Unfortunately, we have run out of time for today's session."

He stares down unblinking at Franklyn, who gazes up at him with hopeful eyes. After a few long seconds, the Beta finally takes the hint. Franklyn and his daemon stand in unison and step awkwardly in front of Hannibal as the Alpha shepherds them to the door to the waiting room.

Once at the door, Franklyn spins around. "Can I call you if I think of something I need to talk to you about?"

Aušrinė sighs theatrically through their Tether, and Hannibal certainly agrees with the sentiment.

"You have my emergency line," he replies. "But it is for dire situations only. You must learn how to process the slings and arrows of your daily disappointments and inconveniences."

Franklyn frowns and clearly has some pitiable protest ready to deploy, but Hannibal reaches forward and opens the door before them. His progress of ushering the sad little man out is halted by the unexpected form of a middle aged Alpha man standing just on the other side of the door.

"Ah, Dr. Lecter," the man says, reaching out to shake Franklyn's hand despite the completely baffled expression on the stout Beta's face. "Special Agent Jack Crawford, FBI."

"FBI or not, I must ask you to wait until my patient has departed and I am able to finalize my notes for this session," Hannibal tells Jack. He pauses for a moment and tilts his head slightly. "Unless, of course, this is an incredibly pressing matter."

"Oh, my apologies, Dr. Lecter," Jack says, releasing Franklyn's hand as if it were electrified. "I can wait."

Hannibal nods curtly before turning his attention to his confounded patient. "I'll see you next week, Franklyn."

Franklyn nods vaguely and heads for the exit with Francine trotting at his ankles, both sneaking a jealous look at Jack's large, impressive dog daemon on the way out. If Themis even noticed their envy, she does not show any indication of it.

"I'll need about five minutes, Agent Crawford. Possibly less. Please, feel free to have a seat in the waiting area until I fetch you," Hannibal says. With that, he turns back into the office

and shuts the door behind him.

I wonder if it was the rude busboy from the French restaurant two weeks ago or the valet who scratched our car that brought the FBI to our hallowed doorstep today, Aušrinė's lilting voice ponders through their Tether.

Neither, Hannibal replies as he strides over and jots down a few brief notes on Franklyn. It takes him only a few seconds, so he immediately begins to set up the office for an ideal physical confrontation if necessary.

Aušrinė hums in merry agreement as Hannibal opens a drawer on his drawing table and places a scalpel next to his pencils. Although she is not a true, wild raven, she can still appreciate the appealing glimmer of the light as it reflects off the scalpel's sharp edge.

That's right. He's Miriam Lass's mentor. Oh, this should be interesting. Aušrinė murmurs. *That girl was delicious.*

Once the office is prepared to his satisfaction, Hannibal returns to the waiting area. Jack sits in the seat nearest the door, his expression halfway between an inconvenienced frown and a sheepish grimace. Themis sits at attention beside him with her ears rolled back flat towards the nape of her strong head.

"I apologize for the delay, Agent Crawford," Hannibal says, moving forward to shake the Agent's hand. "I take my patients' mental health very seriously. Some of them are quite anxious, and only carefully practiced routine and a cultivated safe space like my office can ease their nerves. May I offer you something to drink?"

"I'm the one who should apologize, doctor," Jack says, waving off Hannibal's own apology. He follows the therapist into his spacious office. "And no, thank you. I doubt I'll be here for long."

Once inside, Hannibal walks over to stand beside his drawing table and the carefully laid out scalpel. He turns and watches as the man before him indulges in his detective instincts and takes in the room around him. He keeps his eye on Agent Crawford's daemon more than he does the man himself. They are the ones that require the most thorough convincing.

Jack looks up above the door to the bust of Athena set over the moulding. Aušrinė sits perched atop the bust, her black eyes gleaming as she peers down at the man below her.

"'Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door," he says, struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice as he turns to give Hannibal an incredulous look. "*Really?*"

Hannibal's lips quirk up at the ends in an expression that is not quite a smile. "I assure you, she is not in the habit of croaking 'Nevermore' at my patients."

"Still. Little on the nose, isn't it?"

"We must all have a sense of humor when it comes to our daemons, Agent Crawford. I find that doing so lends us a much-needed sense of perspective."

“That’s true. Just ask my poor wife how many times I’ve said I was ‘dog-tired’ or ‘sick as a dog’. Speaking of which,” Jack says, gesturing towards his daemon as she sniffs curiously at a spot near the chair where Hannibal’s patients sit during their sessions. It’s only a few inches away from the area of the floor where, years before, Miriam Lass’s blood splattered against the rug. “My daemon, Themis.”

It’s certainly a coincidence. Hannibal cleaned the floor until it was utterly spotless. Until not even he could smell the scintillating coppery scent that had lingered behind. Still, it’s thrilling in its own way to see the girl’s mentor in the same place where she fell, blind to what had occurred. So close, and yet so far. He wonders if Agent Crawford still suffers over the unsatisfying, inconclusive question mark left lingering behind in Miriam Lass's file.

“Pleased to meet you, Themis,” Aušrinė says. “If you'll excuse my boldness, I've always preferred to introduce myself.”

The dog looks up to the bird, whatever inconsequential smell that had intrigued her long forgotten. Her tail wags slightly in amusement.

Hannibal notices when something startling occurs to Jack. The Special Agent looks over to Hannibal, then returns his attention across the room to Aušrinė. “You have to be twenty feet away from your daemon. If I was pulled that far away from my Themis, I think I’d be nearly unconscious from the pain. Aren’t you uncomfortable with the distance?”

Took him long enough to notice, Aušrinė grumbles.

“The Tether I share with Aušrinė is slightly longer than average. Although, honestly, I have long suspected that most people don’t fully know the limits of their Tethers. They get far enough to feel the initial discomfort of the pull and never truly test their mettle.”

“And you have?”

Hannibal gives Jack a small smile. He reaches out his left arm and Aušrinė stretches her wings and flaps over to land on her human’s arm. She looks down at Jack’s dog daemon and tilts her head in avian curiosity.

“Of course,” Hannibal says cheerfully. “I’ve had the opportunity to test it, and I must say, it’s exceptionally useful for my various careers.”

“Let me guess: as a psychiatrist, it’s useful to keep your daemon out of reach of potentially unstable patients. And as for your previous work as a trauma surgeon, it allows her to remain out of the way during hectic multi-doctor surgeries.”

“Precisely. There’s a reason many medical professionals have small, easily concealed daemons. Aušrinė, being neither of those things, opted for the ability to stay up and away.”

“I’ll be honest - I didn’t come to those conclusions myself. One of your supervisors at Johns Hopkins remarked on it when I spoke with her earlier.”

Hannibal's expression doesn't falter for a moment. The man remains still while the raven slowly flexes her talons "It almost sounds like you are investigating me, Agent Crawford."

Jack bursts into laughter while Themis's tail wags with mirth. "Oh no, no. This isn't an investigation into you, Dr. Lecter. This is a job interview."

The lingering suspicion in Hannibal drains away, replaced with keen interest. "You want me to consult on a case?"

"Something like that," Jack says, placing his fists on his hips. "More accurately, I'd like you to consult on someone who is consulting on a case."

"You've certainly piqued my curiosity. May I ask why you think I'm the best man for this particular job?"

"You're a recommendation. You have Alana Bloom's enthusiastic approval. She gives you a perfect score on your tact, professionalism, and discretion."

Hannibal smiles. "This task you have for me must be quite the challenge, then. Even in her student days, Alana Bloom was never one to shy away from a difficult patient."

Jack sighs and rubs at the back of his head. "He's a bit… prickly. And he's almost certainly going to resent me discussing this with you even as a possibility, let alone approving you to work on his profile. But pissing him off is a price I'm willing to pay if it means you're able to keep him at the level we need him to be at in order to catch a killer. We don't have time to waste."

"With so much on the line, I will be more than happy to assist in whatever way I can, Agent Crawford," Hannibal says. "Let's arrange a time."

*****

Being someone who prides himself on his fastidiousness and productivity, Hannibal is not perturbed by the timing of the 7 AM sharp meeting with Jack Crawford and his mystery consultant the following morning. Aušrinė is alert and curious despite the long commute, craning her head this way and that in order to take in all of the new and interesting sights of the FBI Academy in Quantico as they are granted a clearance pass and escorted to Jack's office. They arrive with a perfect five minutes to spare.

"Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Lecter," Jack says from where he is seated at his desk. The morning is clearly not treating him nearly as well as it is Hannibal. He has bags under his slightly bloodshot eyes, and even though Themis tries to sit at attention, she betrays herself with a large yawn that displays her enormous, sharp canine teeth.

On one of the walls, the pictures of eight similar-looking young women are arranged around a map of the state of Minnesota. Across the state, eight thumbtacks are pressed into the map. Hannibal surmises that they must be there to show the last known whereabouts of each of the girls. Seven white thumbtacks, one red. He doesn't need to guess what the odd one out symbolizes.

A man stands before the display with his back to Hannibal. He has no visible daemon, but he must have one stowed away somewhere. Secretive and prone to hiding himself away from the world. It only takes a deep breath of air for Hannibal to scent what he has grown to suspect by the hints betrayed by the man's slight build. Omega. The natural scent is muffled beneath some overbearing notes of chemicals and a remarkably terrible aftershave, but there nonetheless. He is on suppressants, but not the kind that tries to completely mask the user in an ill-fitting false-Beta cloak. Hannibal wonders idly if that is by choice or necessity.

Perhaps sensing Hannibal's scrutiny, the younger man's shoulders tense slightly. Slowly, he turns his head to look over his shoulder to the source of his unease. They catch each other's eyes for just a moment before the Omega blinks away, but that fleeting second is enough to sear the image of his face onto the back of Hannibal's mind. A sharp jawline dusted with dark facial hair. Well-shaped cupid's bow lips. Eyes that are difficult to discern between blue, green, and gray beneath the glaring fluorescent lighting above. All of it topped off with a mop of dark brown curls.

For once, Aušrinė has no wry or sarcastic quip immediately ready to deploy upon meeting someone new. Instead, Hannibal has the somewhat disconcerting feeling that she has been briefly stunned into silence, with only a strange thrum something like an ailing and off-rhythm heartbeat sounding through the Tether.

"Dr. Lecter, this is Will Graham, one of the profilers on the missing Minnesota girls case. Will, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I've asked him to join our team to provide... insight."

Something about Jack's delivery makes Will's head snap to look over at the special agent. Hannibal watches as the fine muscles in Will's jaw work for a moment, indecision and suspicion knit into the furrowing of his brow. After some internal calculus that Hannibal can only guess at, he turns his attention back to the Minnesota display without a word.

Will Graham clearly will not be the one to initiate friendly contact between the two of them. Hannibal is more than happy to take the initiative and advantage.

"As Agent Crawford said, my name is Hannibal Lecter. It's a pleasure to meet you, Will," Hannibal says as he approaches the intense Omega. "I may call you Will, yes? Or would you prefer something with more formality?"

"That's uh- that's fine. No need for formality," Will says before taking a small step away from Hannibal and murmuring something that might be 'Nice to meet you'. He does not offer a single thing more.

Now that he is closer, Hannibal quickly scans Will to try to locate his daemon. He has known people with daemons as small and innocuous as ladybugs, so it's entirely possible that even up close he will find no evidence of Will's elusive soul. Finally, he notices a small bulge in Will's shirt pocket and suspects that that is where his quarry hides.

Still, he decides to grant Will a small reprieve from his attention for now. He turns to look at Jack and asks, "What do we know about the case so far?"

“Eight kidnapped girls, one confirmed dead. No clear pattern with regards to their dynamic, but they all have irregular male daemons. When we found Elise Nichols, Will noticed something important,” Jack says, beckoning Hannibal to his desk. He points to two specific pictures showing the scuff marks on the Nichols’ hallway and above the door to the garden shed. “Will noticed these before anyone else did and made the connection that the murderer’s daemon must be pretty big. That checks out with all of the last known locations for the rest of the girls. They all had someone in their lives - parents, significant others, friends, roommates - who needed large daemon accommodations. We also found two major clues on Elise’s body: some metal scrapings that we’re still testing, and antler velvet in the wounds, so we’re looking for a hunter with a predatory daemon who might have a job in metalworking.”

“His daemon isn’t a predator,” Will cuts in.

Jack shakes his head. “Let’s not do this again, Will.”

He’s right, Aušrinė thinks, hunkering down close to Hannibal’s shoulder. *The killer’s daemon is a stag. I’m surprised the Omega hasn’t made the connection, considering the scuff marks would likely be from scraping antlers and the conspicuousness and symbology of the antler velvet. He’s very close.*

I think he would if he were encouraged, Hannibal replies, looking from Jack to Will.

Let’s help him see, Aušrinė purrs.

“When you said the case will involve us traveling to Minnesota, I admit I was curious and did some researching in the recent news,” Hannibal says. “Unfortunately, that does mean I stumbled across poor Elise Nichols’ crime scene picture on a certain website.”

“One of the local cops leaked to Freddie Lounds. Now that she’s got the scent, we can expect Tattle Crime to be a thorn in our side for the rest of the investigation,” Jack says.

Will scoffs. “Tattle Crime. Even the name is disrespectful.”

“I agree,” Hannibal replies. “One can hardly imagine how such a mind works.”

“Greed. Shamelessness. Curiosity that’s gone putrid. Freddie Lounds isn’t a sociopath who can’t understand human emotions. She’s worse. She can and does understand; she just doesn’t care,” Will mutters bitterly. “I can imagine the mindset all too well.”

“You sound like you resent having such a broad imagination, such mutability to blend your mind in with the garish colors of the world around you.”

“I resent a lot of things, Dr. Lecter.”

“You resent your greatest gifts, little chameleon,” Aušrinė says, her voice warm and clear with none of the harsh raspiness that comes when a real raven learns to mimic speech.

Will whirls around and stares at Hannibal and his daemon with raw shock lighting up his eyes like lightning flashing within a high, dark cloud. Daemons speak with other daemons all the

time, but a daemon speaking to a human or vice-versa is highly abnormal and in many cultures extremely provocative or intimate.

All of the exhaustion has left Jack, and he observes the interaction before him with wide eyes. Themis is on her feet, shoulders hunched and her position alert, ready to intervene if Will takes extreme offense.

Will glowers at Hannibal, who can practically see the questions darting around behind those scandalized eyes. Maybe he will ask ‘How did you know?’, or other variations on that theme like the more conciliatory ‘What gave me away?’ or the accusatory ‘Who told you?’ Instead, Will skps the interrogation stage entirely.

“You’re using psychological daemonology on me,” Will says, affront clear in his voice.

Hannibal shrugs. “It’s what I was requested to do in order to help you catch your killer.”

Will turns his furious gaze to Jack, who returns it with a determined look of his own. “You’ve been stuck on the profile, Will. We haven’t made as much progress as we need.”

“Because I haven’t had enough time to-!”

“Time is NOT something that we have!” Jack barks, slamming his fist on his desk. Will winces, and the flinch makes something hot and angry briefly flare somewhere deep, deep within Hannibal’s human suit. It’s gone in just a moment, but the echo of it gives him some pause.

“Eight girls have vanished in eight months, Will. Considering how many killers have a cool-down time of several months or even years, that is a startlingly short amount of time for so much carnage. Add to that the fact that… that he couldn’t *eat* Elise Nichols, his process got interrupted. You think he’s not going to strike sooner rather than later?”

Some of the fury visibly drains out of Will with his fists unclenching and his shoulders loosening slightly, though his eyes are still distrusting and indignant when he turns his attention back to Hannibal. “I think you got lucky with your guess. But don’t try to figure me out again,” he warns. “Now, I’ve got a class on daemon profiling to teach.”

WIth that the strange, testy Omega leaves, and Hannibal sighs with disappointment. He had thought maybe Aušrinė’s audacious move would bring out Will’s elusive daemon, but clearly he will need to employ other tactics to get his way.

“Sorry about that,” Jack says wearily. “Like I said, he can be prickly. Though I’m surprised he didn’t react worse given the stunt you pulled.”

“Aušrinė was merely trying to speak with his daemon,” Hannibal says while Aušrinė grooms her plumage haughtily. “It seems he doesn’t open up very readily. Perhaps justifiably, since he has pure empathy. If he can intuitively understand anyone, then he must worry about keeping track of his own identity. Losing himself as he blends into the color and pattern these killers present him with.”

Jack laughs. “Now that’s an understatement. So… you still in?”

“Absolutely,” Hannibal says, turning his head in the direction Will left. “I enjoy a worthwhile challenge, and I want nothing more than to help Will discover the truth.”

*****

They arrive in Minneapolis around 6 PM the following day. To Hannibal’s regret, Will sits several rows behind him during the course of the flight, stripping him of the opportunity to try to engage the elusive Omega in conversation. Perhaps it’s for the best. He doesn’t want to annoy Will, after all, and their current distance may serve him well for implementing his immediate plans.

Jack wants them all in the same motel, preferably sharing a room in order to promote discussion, cohesion, and mobilization. Fortunately, Will strikes that down immediately, insisting on having his own space. Once that door is open, Hannibal smoothly steps in as well, saying that he too would be more comfortable having his own room. After a heated argument with Hannibal as the mediator between Will and Jack, they decide to each have their own rooms in the same motel. Unfortunately, this does mean that it’s a worn-down but serviceable building several stars below what Hannibal would choose if left to his own devices.

Good thing Hannibal doesn’t plan on being in his room for very long.

Later in the evening, once he is assured that Jack and Will have turned in for the night, Hannibal rents a car and departs on his mission. The first two coffee shops turn up nothing; the baristas are all friendly and professional, and the patrons all courteously keep to themselves. He strikes gold on his third attempt. In a diner around four miles away from the motel, he is saddled with a surly, impatient young waitress with dark brown hair and blue eyes. Her daemon is a piebald turtledove, albino everywhere except for his mottled wings and a patch of feathers at the base of his neck. The tag on her apron says “Cassie B.”

Hannibal makes his decision when he sees her steal the tip left behind for another waitress.

When she clocks out of her shift about fifteen minutes after Hannibal left to wait in the parking lot, he follows her.

*****

The ringing of the motel phone wakes Hannibal just after dawn the next morning. He sits up in the lumpy bed, sweeping his tousled hair back from his eyes. “Hello?” he says, picking up the receiver.

“Dr. Lecter. It’s Jack.”

“Ah, good morning, Agent Crawford. When should I be ready for us to travel to Duluth?”

“Yeah, about that. Something… came up.”

“Oh?”

“There’s been another murder. The girl fits the profile, but from what I’m hearing about the scene… It sounds bad.”

“That’s terrible,” Hannibal says, successfully keeping the smile out of his voice. “Would you like me to join you and Will at the crime scene?”

Jack sighs heavily. “No, I can’t ask you to see something like this in person yet.”

“Are you sure? I was a trauma surgeon, after all. I wouldn’t be surprised if I’ve not only seen things as gruesome, but have had my hand in them as well. I’m quite prepared for whatever this killer has presented us with.”

“Now that I very much doubt,” Jack replies. “Thank you for the offer; I hope we can catch this guy before I have to take you up on it. Sorry to have dragged you halfway across the country just so you can sit around a motel room all day.”

“It’s no trouble, Agent Crawford. I’m quite skilled at amusing myself. Please, if you need me, don’t’ hesitate to call my mobile phone.”

“Got it. Will and I are about to head out. I’ll call you when we’re done. We’ll meet up then to get you up to speed.”

“Understood. Goodbye, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says, hanging up the phone.

Aušrinė chuckles from her perch atop the headboard. “We certainly have had our hands in gruesome things,” she says. She stretches her wings. “So to speak.”

Hannibal smirks and gets out of bed, passing the mini-fridge where he is keeping Cassie Boyle’s lungs on his way to the window. With a smooth motion, he lifts the glass until the window is open and the fresh morning air streams in. He breathes in deeply, enjoying the moment. He then turns back to his daemon. “I think you’ll beat them there.”

“I’m sure I will!” Aušrinė says merrily before taking flight out the window and off into the ever-brightening morning sky.

A Pitying

Chapter Notes

> Time for chapter 3! Optional notes for the previous chapter are up on my Tumblr for the curious.
>
> Took me about a week past my last self-imposed deadline to get this one up, bluh. Maybe I shouldn't worry about it too much since I usually tend towards longer chapters? Who knows. Anyway, blame the elections and the fact that a new Undertale-related game was released on Halloween for the delay on this one.
>
> The next chapter, A Family, is in progress. Because of the trickiness of holidays, my next self-imposed deadline will be the end of November. I am giving brief status updates on my tumblr if it looks like my deadlines are going to be not-so-dead after all.
>
> Thank you all very much for reading! I hope you enjoy, and let me know what you think!

A young woman lies nude and impaled upon the antlers of a great disembodied stag's head. Several crows and ravens peck at the body, greedily tearing away small strips of flesh and gristle from the poor girl's body. Jack rushes forward, shouting at the birds to clear them away while Themis barks harshly beside him. All of the birds scatter except for one raven that sits perched on the woman's head. Blood drips from its large, imposing beak. It caws loudly and seems to stare out beyond Jack and his daemon and right into Will's eyes. It ruffles its dark feathers, spreads its wings, and flies off after its fellow scavengers.

Will fights down the bile rising in his throat. Through the Tether, Sabine's mind is a messy labyrinth of dark, nihilistic half-thoughts.

"The Minneapolis Police Department are calling him the Minnesota Shrike. Something about how his proclivity to gore the bodies mimics how the birds impale their prey. Some are even theorizing that this is the killer goading the police by admitting his daemon is a shrike," Beverly says, swabbing at one of the victim's wounds. She pulls away her implement and frowns at what she sees on the end. "More antler velvet."

"But did he add it, or did it come from the stolen stag head?" Zeller asks.

"Hard to say. We'll have to match the quantity to the antlers to see for sure."

All three members of the forensics team groan in unison at the idea of such laborious, boring, time-consuming work. With grumbles and sighs, they get back to their duties.

“Shrikes are technically predators, I guess. You don’t really think of cute little birds when you think of mighty hunters, but it would fit the profile,” Zeller muses as he frowns down at the girl’s torso. “Someone stitched her up. Looks like a clean job, but the birds almost ripped it open.”

“He took something from her,” Will says, approaching the stag head slowly. “A trophy. She’ll be missing something. At least one organ.”

Jack shakes his head, sighing. “Look for what he took,” he commands. Zeller nods and gets to work.

“Oh, you guys aren’t going to like this,” Jimmy says from where he stands near the stag’s antlers. He pulls off a pair of goggles that are tinted with the telltale sapphire blue of a Rusakov lens. He holds the goggles out, offering them to any takers.

Will watches as Jack and Themis move around the horrific tableau to stand beside Jimmy and Minerva. Jack accepts the goggles and straps them on over his own eyes. His expression doesn’t change much aside from a grin, tight thinning of his lips. Jimmy hovers near him anxiously, saying nothing as he prepares a Rusakov-filtered camera to photograph the scene.

After several seconds of grim observation, Jack removes the goggles and looks over to Will. “Come see this.”

As soon as he has joined Jack and Jimmy, Will can see what ignited the forensic team’s suspicions enough to bring out the specialty devices. There’s a very faint golden glimmer on one of the points of the stag’s antlers, barely visible in the bright morning light. *Residual Dust,* Sabine murmurs as she climbs up onto Will’s shoulder. Her eyes swivel independently, but ultimately both focus on the gleam. *The fact that we can see it unaided at all…*

“Bad sign,” Will says aloud, taking the goggles from Jack.

With the goggles over his eyes, Will’s world is submerged in a deep, calming blue. At the tip of the suspicious antler, the faint glow has been transformed into a bright, golden spot. Each speck of Dust reflects and refracts, making the antler look as if it had been dipped in molten gold and rolled in diamond fragments.

Will looks over toward Jack. Beneath the blue tinge of a Rusakov filter, every living human has some amount of Dust covering their bodies. Some have more, some have less. Small children have only the faintest glow of it, while a wise, elderly grandmother may glow like the sun with it. From what Will has determined in his studies of Dust and daemons, Jack has a normal, healthy amount for someone his age. “Are the local police still working to ID her?”

“‘Still?’” Zeller asks in disbelief. “She was only found a few hours ago. She’s barely cold. Of course they don’t have an ID yet.”

“Then we can only guess at her the exact nature of her daemon,” Will says. “But we can narrow it down based on size, at least. I think we’re all on the same page when it comes to what the residual Dust on the antler tip implies. The big questions are whether or not the victim lingered, and if she or her daemon went first.”

“There’s signs that her lungs were cut out mid-breath,” Zeller says as he investigates the girl’s chest cavity. “That would certainly be the cause of death if she didn’t die from the daemon being impaled.”

Will takes a few small steps around the body, looking for the ideal position. Finally, he stops. He holds his right hand over the chest cavity and his left over the antler that has been saturated with Dust. He stands there for a moment, silent and still, feeling the curious gazes of his associates boring into his back. Suddenly, he jerks his arms, mimicking a quick slice and rip with his right hand and an impalement with the left.

He feels the pulsing flesh of the lung as it seizes and stills. He feels the desperate fluttering of the daemon as it suffers the impact that shatters it apart. Both at once - perfect synchronicity.

He shudders, abruptly moving his hands away to hang limp and awkward and drained of all the raw, horrible power that he had felt coursing through them. “It’s possible,” he says, looking down at his right hand as he clenches it a few times to try to disperse the lingering phantom sensation of the lung. “Difficult. But it feels like it happened simultaneously.”

He pauses. There’s a speck of Dust clinging to his knuckle in an unusual way. As his associates speak, he tries to listen in while studying it closely.

“He couldn’t do that while breaking the taboo,” Jimmy muses. “Even if he’s completely devoid of empathy, he wouldn’t be capable of such precise movements since it’s completely overwhelming to touch somebody else’s daemon. Or so I’ve heard. I’ve never gotten handsy with someone else’s daemon or vice versa.”

“Wow, really? Even in a long-term, intimate relationship?” Beverly asks.

“You clearly haven’t been paying very close attention to the dating horror stories I’ve brought to work if you think I’d let any of those guys put their grubby mitts on Minerva,” Jimmy says as Minerva visibly shudders from where she clings to his back.

Jack glares at the three forensic specialists. But before he can chastise them, a spark of realization ignites behind his eyes. “He wouldn’t be able to impale and rip at the same time unless he received specialty training in a field that requires daemon handling.”

“That would be huge for narrowing the profile!” Beverly says. Hartwin romps at her feet, energized by her revelation. “There’s really only a few career fields that would apply to. Health care, law enforcement, child care, elderly care… maybe a few others, but that’s about it, right?”

“Wait, but aren’t we looking into metal workers?” Jimmy asks.

“Exactly!” Beverly exclaims, hitting her fist into her open palm. “We’d want to look for someone who currently works with metal fitting, but has a background in one of those areas!”

“You know what’s a much simpler alternative to all this quasi-impossible murder theatrics you’re fantasizing about?” Zeller grumbles. “The fact that he probably has an accomplice. One of them impaled the daemon, the other ripped the lung.”

“But the profile we’ve been building for this guy has never even hinted that he’s been working with someone,” Jimmy says.

Zeller gestures broadly to the terrible display laid out before them. “And he’s never done something like this before either! He’s clearly escalating. If he’s found someone who can help him out, why not take the opportunity?”

Jack exhales loudly in irritation and turns to Will. “What do you think, Will?”

”Have you ever looked at a painting or old musical instrument under a Rusakov-filtered device?” Will asks.

“What does that have to do with what we were talking about?” Jack asks. His voice is tired and just barely clinging to his patience.

“It’s important. Anyone can answer.”

“Can’t say that I have, personally,” Beverly says.

“Dust accumulates on them. Even if nobody has ever died near them. Especially if the creation is old and the product of a lot of time, thought, and effort.”

“What’s your point?” Zeller asks.

“My point is that this antler isn’t the only thing that probably shouldn’t have Dust on it,” Will says, stepping closer to the tableau. He raises his hand and looks down at the extremely faint golden glow that covers his palm. A few more flecks of Dust drift off, cast away from his body and drawn as if magnetized to gently land on Cassie Boyle’s cheek.

“This is art,” Will murmurs.

In the distance, a raven caws loud enough to shake Will out of his almost spell-like concentration. He quickly removes the goggles and rubs as his eyes as he squints at the strain of the natural light. As his vision clears, he looks out toward the sound and spots a raven sitting in a low branch of a tree out in the distance. The tree stands apart from the rest of the woods that encircle the clearing - nothing but yards and yards of gently swaying grass surround it. The bird caws again.

“Geez, these birds are bold,” Zeller grumbles. “It’s like it called dibs on the body and it’s mad we haven’t taken the hint to buzz off.”

“Well, they have to be. They’re scavengers with territory near a large city. They have to be a little sassy and clever to compete,” Jimmy replies. Minerva clambers up from her place on his back to perch wobbily on his shoulder. She whispers something into his ear that makes him light up with an enormous grin. “‘Game recognize game’, indeed!”

“Never, ever say something like that again,” Zeller groans.

Beverly shudders. “Co-signed. That was so lame I think that took years off my life.”

“You’re both just jealous that my daemon has the manual dexterity to kind of fist-bump me.”

“I am actually a little jealous of that, no lie,” Beverly admits.

“Enough!” Themis shouts. Her voice would be warm and rich if it were not currently full of righteous indignation. Everyone nearby, daemon and human alike, freezes. Beverly, Jimmy, and Zeller stare at Jack and his daemon with wide, startled eyes. Their daemons all shrink back, fur standing on end in shock.

Will curses his trembling fingers as he fumbles to put his glasses back in place over his eyes. Sabine remains on his shoulder instead of darting to her pocket. She tries to disappear against the pattern of his shirt, but dark, angry spots flare up and down her tiny body. Indignation and fury rattle through their Tether, and Will can’t tell if the miasma of angry emotions are mostly coming from him, Sabine, or an equal share from both..

“This is a crime scene!” Jack barks, picking up where Themis left off. “I tolerate a lot of screwing around from you. Hell, I support it more often than not! I understand the need to compartmentalize through camaraderie. But this is a *major* escalation for this killer. Take it seriously.”

The forensics team murmurs a collective, sheepish series of apologies like children who have been yelled at by an intimidating teacher.

Jack turns and points to Will. “You are going to need to elaborate on your little proclamation that this travesty is ‘art’.”

“It wouldn't attract Dust if the killer didn't put a lot of work into it,” Will says, hoping that he doesn't sound like he's on the verge of tears. “If he didn't think he had elevated her in some way.”

Jack's silence is almost electric with his frustration and disapproval. Without even looking at him, Will can feel it filling the air, crackling around him and looking for something to strike. “You didn't call the last crime scene a work of art.”

“Because it wasn't. It was an apology. The man who killed Elise Nichols straddles the line between practicality and sentimentality. This-,” Will says, gesturing towards the body. “This is an editorial.”

They're different killers, Sabine sighs.

Will almost says it aloud. But he remembers the swift resistance to his insistence that the original killer - the Shrike, if that's what the media insists on calling him - does not have a predatory daemon. It's enough to give him pause. He'd be bombarded with questions, demands to explain himself, and maybe some more of that maddening disbelief.

So he keeps his suspicion inside. He will let it guide his thoughts and actions as he works to uncover the truth, and if he and Sabine are the only ones walking that path, so be it.

It takes hours to finish documenting the scene and combing it for evidence. By the time Will is cleared to go back to his hotel room, the sun is already entirely set. Sun up to sun down with the shadow of a murder tableau that is, at least where Will's experience is concerned, wholly unprecedented.

He falls asleep seconds after collapsing into bed.

*****

There is a knock at Will's motel door early the following morning. His hair is still damp and his bathroom still steaming from his recent shower. "Damn it, Jack," he mutters, toweling furiously at his curls. He glares into the fogged mirror. He hasn't even had time to fully dress yet, having only changed into a white undershirt and light blue boxers. If Jack wants to show up unannounced, then he can endure the embarrassment of dealing with Will in his skivvies. As he heads to the door, he scoops up Sabine from the extremely faux-marble counter top in the bathroom and allows her to climb around and cling to the back of his shirt.

When he answers the door, Will's petty vengeance backfires in a spectacular way. It isn't happily-bonded, vaguely-paternalistic Jack Crawford at his door, but rather the new, frustrating addition to Will's already fully frustration-saturated life. Suddenly his under-dressed state is no longer a petty weapon, but a self-conscious liability. It takes all of his willpower not to slam the door on the cheerful, smiling face of Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

"Good morning," Hannibal says. He keeps his eyes dutifully and respectfully above Will's shoulders, and Will can't decide if he's grateful or if it's further insult to injury. "May I come in?"

Will squints at Hannibal. The Alpha is carrying a dark brown paper bag with a logo reading L'ÉTOILE DU NORD ~ MARKET & PATISSERIE. Clearly some fancy and high-end local shop. From there, Will tries craning his neck in an attempt to peer around his unwanted guest.

"If you're looking for Agent Crawford, he's in court obtaining additional search warrants," Hannibal says. "You'll have the reins of the investigation today."

Will raises an eyebrow at the unexpected statement. "Not often I'm trusted with the reins to anything," he drawls.

Hannibal tilts his head in bemusement. Sitting on his shoulder, Aušrinė mimics the gesture. "You certainly know more about the ins-and-outs of working with the FBI than I do," he says. "It would be foolish to pretend otherwise."

An Alpha willingly ceding authority to an Omega? Sabine ponders through their Tether. *Rare.*

Suspicious, you mean, Will scoffs.

Still, he doesn't sense deceit in Hannibal's words, and if he's being intentionally ingratiating, he doesn't seem to be expressing it with obvious ill-will. It is, however, extremely likely that he's trying to butter Will up for some reason or another, and that alone is more than enough justification for Will to stay on his toes around Lecter.

“Get inside before anyone sees and starts getting ideas,” WIll mutters, stepping aside for Hannibal to enter.

“Heaven forbid,” Hannibal says, smiling.

Will shuts the door behind Hannibal and leans back against it as he watches the psychiatrist move towards two chairs around a small table situated near the window. While he moves, Sabine scurries down Will’s back and onto the burgundy and cornflower blue carpet, blending in seamlessly with the outdated pattern.

Hannibal sets the bag down on the table and then turns to look to Will. “May I sit?”

“You’re asking me permission to sit,” Will repeats, his voice deadpan.

“Yes.”

Will laughs. “Why?”

“Even though this is a motel room - a borrowed space - it is still your space for the time being. Yours to do with as you see fit.”

Will stares at him for a moment, pondering his words. He saunters over to the chairs and sits, crossing his legs and looking up at Hannibal. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it isn’t going to work on me,” he says.

“And what is that?”

“The illusion of choice. Of control,” Will says.”The same thing a savvy Omega does when his toddler is going through a tantrum phase. ‘Do you want to wear the blue shoes or the green shoes?’ The kid thinks he’s got control of the situation, but it’s only cosmetic. You ask me permission to sit at one of the chairs, but you don’t call ahead to ask if it’s a good time for you to come over. Because then the answer may be ‘no’. And you can’t have that.”

“Very perceptive,” Hannibal says. “I can certainly see what would lead you to that conclusion, but I do think that it says something about you.”

Will glowers at him. “And what is that?” he says sarcastically, throwing Hannibal’s words back at him.

“You believe everything has to have a catch,” Hannibal replies. “You have been afforded unconditional trust, unconditional love, unconditional authority so rarely that, when the opportunity seems to be before you, you are always on the lookout for the snare lurking in the underbrush. Ironically, it can make you short-sighted in ways you may not expect. You might spot the snare, but not the pit covered in leaves.”

Will gives a small, disbelieving laugh. “If railroading me was the snare, then what’s the pit?”

“Getting you to open up to conversation,” Hannibal says smoothly. “We’ve already exchanged more words today than we did the first time we met.”

Will regards him coldly, slowly tapping a finger against his thigh in thought. “Sit,” he commands, using the same voice he uses for training some of hisi more obstinate dogs. Hannibal obeys, his lips turned into a small, satisfied smile.

“That trick won't work for you a second time,” Will warns.

“I'd be extremely disappointed if it did.”

“What’s with the bag?”

“Though we hardly know each other, it probably won’t surprise you to learn that I have extremely high standards when it comes to many things in life,” Hannibal says as he reaches forward to open the bag. “This extends to food. I realize that this can be an inconvenience when I travel with others, so I try to make up for it with a little generosity.”

“So you brought me breakfast.”

“I *made* you breakfast,” Hannibal says brightly as he removes two sets of glass containers and two thermoses from the bag. “A protein scramble featuring handmade sausage, egg, cremini mushrooms, and onion.”

“How the hell did you accomplish that?” Will asks as he accepts one of the offered containers. He peers at it as if it is some eldritch, impossible thing. “The rooms here barely have mini-fridges.”

“It’s simple if you know what to look for and where it find it. I had some time on my hands yesterday while you were waylaid at the newest crime scene. So, I rented a car and took in some of the culinary sights Minneapolis has to offer. I found a local organic market and purchased the necessary ingredients there. As for the preparation, nearly every metropolis in the country now has some form of co-op or rental cooking space startups for people who wish to produce restaurant-quality food but who live in cramped apartments.”

Will opens the lid to his container. A wonderful savory smell wafts up from the food, and suddenly he finds some of his contrarian bitterness crumbling away before the powerful hunger that the scent kindles in him. He skewers a piece of sausage with his fork and pops the morsel into his mouth. It’s juicy, flavorful, perfectly seasoned, and absolutely unlike any other sausage he has ever tasted before. He expected Lecter to be a competent cook based on his clearly passionate feelings about the preparation of food, but Will wasn’t expecting this level of skill.

“You made the sausage too?” Will asks after swallowing.

“Yes. It’s primarily organ meat, a mixture of pork and lamb.”

“It’s, um… it’s delicious,” Will mutters, almost sheepish to be delivering a compliment after being so difficult. “Thank you. For going to all the trouble.”

Hannibal is silent for a moment. Will keeps his eyes firmly on the food, not wanting to look up and accidentally catch Hannibal’s eyes. Finally, Will hears a small huff of laughter. “No

trouble at all," Hannibal says. "It's my pleasure."

They eat in silence after that. Near the end of the meal, Will stops to regard the final bite of sausage as it sits skewered on his fork. So much care and expertise went into this food's creation that he finds himself wondering what it would look like beneath a Rusakov filter. He can almost imagine it - a faint glow of Dust clinging to the food as a work of artistic merit. His eyebrows slowly start to furrow as his imagination spirals away from that image and on to another. The meat impaled on the tongs of the fork. Cassie Boyle impaled on the antlers of the stag head.

The fork clatters as Will drops it into the nearly empty glass container. He clutches at his temples, shutting his eyes tight and trying to force the haunting image out of his mind.

"Will? Is something wrong?"

Will takes in a few deep, ragged breaths in an attempt to calm his hammering heart. He shakes his head weakly. "Headache," he lies. "Don't worry about it."

He can practically feel Hannibal's eyes burning into him. Considering. Judging. Worst of all: pitying.

Hannibal sighs. "I'll be honest with you, Will. I feel that we will be unable to make much progress until we are on more equal footing."

For a brief, petty moment Will wants to completely dig in his heels and make things needlessly complicated. He wants to pretend he has no idea what Hannibal is talking about. Wants to challenge him on the nebulous and context-dependent concept of 'equality'. Wants to do anything but acquiesce.

Instead, he finally brings himself to raise his eyes to Hannibal's face. "You want to meet my daemon that much?" he says. He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. "Then find her."

A small, intrigued smile plays across Hannibal's lips. His raven gleefully hops down from his shoulder to the table to the floor. She tilts her head this way and that, examining the carpet around the table carefully.

"Is your Tether unusually long?" Hannibal asks. "It would be unsportsmanlike if she were hiding in the bathroom."

Will shakes his head as he finishes swallowing a sip of his coffee. "Normal Tether," he says. He looks down at the still steaming coffee in the thermos. "Don't tell me that this is somehow your own specialty blend as well."

"A local roast, I'm afraid. Still, it had a very high recommendation from the enthusiastic young cashier at the market."

The raven continues hopping around the vicinity looking for clues, clearly enjoying her little game of hide-and-go-seek. She chuckles. "She truly is a master of disguise," she murmurs,

turning to look to Hannibal as she speaks. Will knows the gesture for what it is, however. After all, if she truly wanted to speak directly to her human alone, she could communicate through their Tether.

Maybe it's the warmth and satisfaction from breakfast keeping him more subdued, but at least in this one peculiar moment, Will finds the daemon's tendency to skirt the line of social taboo more strangely curious than infuriating. He takes another long, slow sip of his coffee and watches her with sharp, focused attention.

A few seconds later, the raven spots something that makes her hop back a small step. She ruffles her feathers in excitement and leans down, peering at a strange, slightly off-colored area near Will's chair. She regards it curiously for a moment before saying, "Nice to finally meet you."

"That's a stain," Sabine's raspy voice says from above the raven. During Will and Hannibal's initial conversation, she had crept along behind her human, staying within range of their Tether, all while altering her coloring to blend in with the carpet as she moved. Then, once they began breakfast, she blended in with the dark brown of the table's wood and climbed up one of the legs closest to Will. Now revealed, she slowly undoes her disguise, the dark brown fading into the salmon pink of her primary coloring.

Hannibal's raven hops closer to Sabine, laughing. "Very impressive! I'm Aušrinė. Wonderful to meet you. I look forward to working together with you."

Sabine's tail curls tighter around the thin table leg. "Sabine," she says by way of introduction. But that is all she says. Through the Tether, she groans, *Please distract them.*

"She doesn't talk out loud much," Will says. Hannibal looks up from their daemons, but Aušrinė remains completely focused and seemingly charmed by her counterpart. Her attention makes his palms itch, almost like when he'd get grazed by poison ivy as a child. "Probably learned by example. I don't think I ever heard my dad's daemon speak."

"We are prone to perpetuating our family habits, even when we find them distasteful or inconvenient," Hannibal says. He pauses for a moment, clearly weighing his next words carefully. "Especially when there may be a genetic component involved."

"If you're trying to ask if irregularity runs in my family, it does. My dad was irregular. He grew up in the foster system, so who knows after that."

"Since your daemon is female, she probably didn't present as irregular until her settling, correct?"

"Yep," Will mutters, his leg starting to shake and a fine sheen of sweat starting to prickle at his forehead.

"Was your father supportive when it happened?" Hannibal asks, leaning forward slightly.

"In his way," Will says. He smiles wryly. "Didn't really know what to do about me. Pitied me."

“Even though he had gone through the same circumstances?”

Will shrugs and stares down at the floor.

“You shouldn't hide yourself away,” Aušrinė tells Sabine softly. “What you can do is truly exemplary.”

The itch on Will's palms intensifies, now feeling as if he stuck his hands into a fire ant nest. Sabine makes a small, choked sound. Only after she makes it again and again does Will realize it's a bitter laugh. She skitters down the table leg and up Will's naked, unshaven leg. She scurries up onto his chest and begins blending in with the white shirt.

“That's enough of that,” she whispers.

Will swallows. “We aren't used to being so… exposed,” he says. He tries not to think too much of the irony. Here he is, an under-dressed Omega in the company of an unbonded Alpha, and the most he feels about that is a vague, passionless echo in the back of his mind that society might find such a thing scandalous. But the interaction between two daemons, something so normal and natural that even toddlers' daemons will roll around playing with each other, has him flinching and shuddering away.

But he has his reasons, after all.

Aušrinė flutters back up to perch at Hannibal's shoulder. Will may not be as skilled at reading daemons as he is humans - that's Sabine's job, and she's too busy trying to calm herself down to contribute much - but he detects a distinct glimmer of disappointment and intrigue in the bird's dark eyes.

“It’s understandable,” Hannibal says kindly. “If it wasn't in your nature to think and feel in such a way, then she wouldn't have settled the way she did. And that, of course, doesn't even touch the social ramifications of an irregular settling.”

“It’s not normal,” Will mutters, staring down at his folded hands. “To think and feel the way I do.”

“Perhaps. But that doesn't make it wrong.”

Rare, Sabine repeats through the Tether, her inner voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

Uncomfortable and desperate to get as far away from such vulnerable subject matter as he possibly can, Will retreats to the relative safety of brutal murder. “Did Jack fill you in on the details of the most recent crime scene?” he asks.

“Only the broad strokes,” Hannibal replies. “It’s difficult to believe the same person who left a bouquet of flowers for Elise Nichols would resort to such brutality.”

Will risks a look up to Hannibal’s face and catches his eyes. A strange color, possibly classified as brown on any official licenses but closer to red than any other eyes Will has ever seen. They are placid and curious, clearly enjoying his time with WIll despite everything.

“I agree. It’s so difficult to believe that I don’t think this is the Shrike at all.”

Surprise lights up Hannibal’s strange eyes. “Really?”

Will nods. “Seeing that crime scene was like looking at an optical illusion that hinges on the interplay between light and dark,” he says in hushed, almost conspiratorial tones. As if Jack Crawford will hear his blasphemy from court and charge in to strike it down. “You need the dark to carve out the shape of the light in order to fully see the image contained within. The disdain this new killer had for this most recent victim is nothing like the obsessive, poisoned love that the killer of Elise Nichols has for the person he's fixated on.”

“Is the Shrike in love with her? A romantic muse inspiring his work?”

“Not in that way,” Will says. The very suggestion turns his stomach. It feels crass and unthinkable in his mind, as if the very thought of it has crossed a deep, indelible line. “It's not carnal. It's… familial.”

That's it! Sabine proclaims through the Tether. Some of her discomfort forgotten, her mind whirls with connections clicking into place.

“It's his daughter,” Will says in a rush, his mouth moving to articulate the cascading ideas like a hand engaged in automatic writing is guided by a ghostly muse. “She looks like the other girls. She's still unsettled - that’s why he targeted girls with wildly different daemons. But she's already irregular. She has a same sex daemon, and…”

The odd marks left in high places around the Nichols’ house. The fact that every missing girl was taken from a dwelling with large daemon accommodations. The postmortem goring wounds on Elise Nichols. All there laid out in plain sight. Yet, at the time, he couldn't fit the pieces together. If the stakes weren't so dire, Will would almost find it comical that someone had to spell it all out so literally for him.

“And so does he,” Hannibal says, following Will's line of thinking flawlessly. “A stag.”

They sit in silence for several long seconds as the weight of it all sinks in.

“We've got him,” Will breathes. Every part of him hums with the energy of discovery. “We just need to find him.”

He only needs five minutes to get dressed.

*****

The drive to the construction company office which has been flagged by the FBI’s analysis of the stray metal filings goes by maddeningly slowly, at least to Will’s overtaxed and overtired mind. Hannibal asks occasional questions about the process - what will they be expected to do upon arrival, how did the FBI narrow down their search to this particular site, and so on. All very polite and deferential.

Yet Will would much rather drive in silence, not even really thinking or communicating with Sabine. Just allowing the quiet drone of the car engine and the sound of the tires against the

road to lull him into a blessed traveler's haze. But he puts up with Hannibal's questions as best as he can. Between the unexpected conversational overload of the morning, the adrenaline thrill of the breakthrough in the profile, and now the long drive, Will feels more than a little drained.

Upon arrival at the office, Will lets Hannibal do the talking with the flabbergasted Beta receptionist. Watching him charm her into allowing them to do their job largely unobstructed is like watching a magician pull off an elaborate, inexplicable trick. If left to this task alone, Will would have just shoved the warrant at her and tried to go about his business.

There are far more employee records than Will had thought there would be. They're looking at hundreds of individual records easily, and God only knows how long it will take to sort through them all for evidence that might not even be there. Will has Hannibal start at the beginning of the alphabet while he starts at the end with the goal of splitting the task and meeting in the middle. When over two hours have passed and he has barely reached the beginning of surnames starting with "S", Will decides to finally face facts. They'll need to pack the records up and continue going through them off-site.

"It was a pipe dream that we'd just luck into something obvious right away," Will says. He sets one of the boxes of files down with a thud. He wipes his brow as he straightens up and glares at the many boxes they've compiled. They should still fit in the trunk of the car, but it will be a tight fit. He turns to Hannibal. "Better get used to it if Jack insists on keeping you on. This is the boring, bureaucratic heart of the job, where the biggest hazards are paper cuts and eye strain."

Hannibal laughs. "What's the phrase… 'you don't want to see how the sausage is made'?"

Despite himself, Will chuckles. "Something like that. Help me get this stuff into the trunk."

The first few boxes go fairly smoothly. That ends when, while carrying the fourth box of files down the short stairs leading up to the office, Hannibal misjudges one of his steps and spills the contents of the box. He tries to wave Will away so he can rectify his mistake, but Will insists on being the one to put it back in order. Upon seeing the spill, the Beta receptionist dashes out to berate Will, her tabby cat daemon puffed up and hissing at her side.

Back inside the office, alone and unseen, Hannibal takes one of the files and carefully slips it into the lining of his coat. It has three pieces of information. A name: Garrett Jacob Hobbs. A daemon: Cernunnos - male elk. And an address.

A Family

Chapter Notes

New chapter time! As always, the notes for the previous chapter can be found here. They're pretty sparse this time, partially because I am sick as hell today.

The next chapter, A Murmuration, will probably be posted after the new year. With the holidays, I might not have as much time to work on the fic as I'd like. I'll do my best, though! Ideally, I'll be able to post right after the new year and I'll have more than just the next chapter ready.

One final thing. I, like everyone else in the world it seems, am pretty pissed at tumblr for pulling bullshit. I want to keep posting my chapter notes SOMEWHERE, but by no means does it need to be there. For the people who read my notes, how would you all most like to see those notes? Keep them on tumblr even though it sucks? Post to the Dreamwidth journal I made in 2012 and never used? Twitter threads/Twitlonger? Pillowfort if the invite I requested goes through? Please let me know what you think so I can more easily make a decision. I've made a strawpoll for it here for those who wish to chime in.

Thanks for your patience, and I hope you enjoy!

MORNING

Abigail Hobbs first sees the raven when it lands on her father's livestock trailer out in the driveway. She spots the flash of black in her peripheral vision as she sits brushing her hair on her bed and turns toward the unexpected motion out of instinct. The bird hops along the roof of the gleaming metal trailer, leaning down to peer in through the small holes that line the top of each side.

"Maybe there's a mouse or bug inside," Melinoë says as she takes the form of a red squirrel and climbs up to sit on their windowsill. Her little brown nose and whiskers twitch. "So it's trying whatever it can to get in, even though there's probably like a thousand bugs in the garden alone."

As if sensing that it is being watched, the raven looks up and gazes directly at the window. There's something strange about it that Abigail can't quite place, an intelligence and shrewdness in its eyes that she has rarely seen in other animals despite being very well-versed in hunting and the outdoors. It tilts its head in thought and then resumes its inspection of the trailer. After another moment, it flaps down and lands inside the bed of her father's pickup truck.

“Weird,” Melinoë murmurs as Abigail stands. She leaps down from the windowsill and runs over to climb up to Abigail’s shoulder. “Birds are so weird sometimes.”

Abigail laughs as she slings her backpack over her free shoulder. “You might get stuck as a bird, you know. You’re not out of the woods yet.”

Melinoë shakes her bushy tail. “I’d make it work. We're nothing if not resourceful.”

As they walk through their home’s wide hallway toward the kitchen, Abigail picks up the scent of frying egg, sizzling bacon, and buttery hashbrowns. Eager for breakfast, she picks up her pace.

When she enters the kitchen, she finds her father at the oven plating breakfast. His daemon stands outside, sticking his dark brown muzzle in through the open window above the sink. Because of the design of their home, Cernunnos can certainly fit inside the kitchen, but navigating around the large bull elk can be difficult during a hectic breakfast. It’s easier in spring, when his antlers shed and suddenly dissolve into Dust. When Abigail was a little girl, she was always so interested in watching it happen. Something about the physical object dissolving into ethereal flecks of gold spoke to her innately, and she still can’t fully articulate why she was so fascinated with it. They called it Cernunnos’ “Firefly Season” because of the way the Dust would disperse, like fireflies flickering over a still pond.

At the time, she had wanted to be just like her dad when she grew up. She had wanted Melinoë to settle as a stag, to have her own Firefly Season every year. But after a Kindergarten assignment where she had to stand up and tell the rest of the class how she would like Melinoë to settle, her teacher had told her that because Melinoë was a female daemon, she would never be able to grow the enormous antlers that Cernunnos could. She was utterly heartbroken until later that evening, when her father calmly and lovingly explained to her that, although it was true that Melinoë would never be able to look like Cernunnos, they were connected by something much rarer and more precious. They were irregular in the same way, bound past blood and bone and to the very core of their soul.

It was extremely comforting as a five year old. Now, a dozen years after that confusing but exhilarating revelation, Abigail isn’t so sure. She isn’t sure about a lot of things anymore.

She steps quietly behind her dad’s back and heads to the kitchen table where her mother sits. Louise Hobbs has slight bags under her eyes and she leans over the table with her head in her left hand. She rubs at her temple in slow, distracted circles as she looks down at a few sheets of paper laid out before her. Her beaver daemon, Caecilius, sits on one of the other chairs next to her. He yawns, the kitchen light glinting off his long yellow incisors.

“Hey, mom,” Abigail greets as she sits next to her mother.

Louise startles slightly and looks up. Now that Abigail is closer, she can see that her mother’s eyes don't just have dark bags beneath them. They are slightly bloodshot, and her skin seems more pallid and waxy than usual. Despite how clearly exhausted and stressed she is, she manages to give her daughter a warm little smile. “Oh, Abby. You surprised me.”

“Sorry. Um. Are you okay? You seem a little…”

Louise's eyes dart to her husband as he approaches. "I'm fine, sweetie," she says, shaking her head. "Just tired."

"Morning, ladies," Hobbs says as he approaches wife and daughter. Abigail can see a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, and he winces slightly as he reaches forward to pass a plate to Louise. Just far enough to feel the strain of the pull with Cernunnos outside.

"Aren't you eating with us, dad?" Abigail asks, noting the two plates.

"Wish I could, but I need to head out early for work."

Louise's lip twitches slightly. Abigail notices it, but she's pretty sure that her dad doesn't. She feels him lean down over her and drop a kiss on the crown of her head. If her hair was short, she expects it would stand on end with the goosebumps rippling up and over her scalp.

"But the good news is, I probably won't be out working too late," Hobbs says. He leans down, moving to kiss Louise on the corner of her lips, but she pulls away before he can make it.

"Morning breath," she says, laughing nervously. "Really bad today. You don't want any of that stink on you, believe me."

Hobbs regards her for a moment, his light grey eyes an opaque fog. Anything could be lurking in it. But in the time it takes a few heavy heartbeats to rattle Abigail's rib cage, he brightens. "Suit yourself," he says, grinning. He points a teasing finger at his wife. "But that means I get to sneak two kisses from you tonight. See you two later."

"Bye, dad. Have a good day," Abigail says, smiling brightly at her father. "I'll get the door behind you."

She locks the door behind her father once he has stepped outside to join his daemon. With Melinoë in one hand, she walks over to the kitchen window and watches him open the livestock trailer. Cernunnos lumbers into the back, each step echoing with a metallic clang under his hooves.

It would be worse than being a bird, Melinoë thinks through their Tether. *We could never fly on an airplane. We'd have to have a special large daemon permit and use a trailer like that just to get anywhere. And with the length of the pickup and the trailer… no matter where they go when they're traveling, they must always be at the end of their Tether. I'd hate it. Do you think that's why he's-*

Abigail severs the thought before Melinoë can complete it. As the self-imposed static rattles through her brain, she smiles again as Hobbs looks back towards the house. He grins and waves. Finally, he drives away, and Abigail releases the breath that she didn't realize she was holding.

"Abigail…" Louise says hesitantly. "Have you…"

Abigail turns and heads back towards the table. "Hm?"

“Have you noticed anything strange about your dad lately?”

Abigail almost comes up short on one of the last steps towards the table. She exaggerates the stumble and kneels down, muttering, “My shoelaces.”

As she pretends to tie her already tied right shoe, Abigail’s mind whirls. *Does she know?* she asks Melinoë, a horrible churning starting up in the pit of her stomach.

Oh, now you want to talk about it? Melinoë replies bitterly.

Don’t do this now, Mel!

“Abby?”

Abigail darts up, settling into her seat. “Sorry about that, mom,” she mutters. “Uh. What did you say?”

“Have you noticed your dad acting weird recently?”

“What do you mean?”

Louise sighs. Next to her, Caecilius irritably flaps his tail against his seat. “It’s just… something seems off with him. He’s felt a little intense sometimes over the past couple of weeks. Moody.”

“Dad’s always been a little intense,” Abigail says, focusing on her rapidly-cooling eggs. She stirs at them, and for a brief second, she wishes she could just smash the plate against the wall. The feeling is gone as quickly as it arrived, leaving behind only a creeping guilt and dread at the core of her spine. “You’ve seen how he gets in hunting season.”

“Yes, but…” Louise says. She pauses for a moment, thinking. She picks up some of the sheets of paper around her and shows them to Abigail. They’re all bills, banking reports, and other financial documents. “It’s not just that anymore. He says he’s working longer hours, and he’s definitely been away from home more the past few months. But that should come with plenty of overtime pay, and that just isn’t reflected in our finances. Things are actually a little tighter than they were last year.”

Blood pounds in Abigail’s ears. *She knows,* Melinoë whispers, her internal voice high and thready with approaching panic. *She knows, she knows, she knows, she-*

“If he’s seeing someone else and you know about it, please tell me, Abby,” Louise says quietly, folding her hands on top of the financial documents.

Melinoë goes silent. The blood pounding in Abigail’s head seems to skip a beat. For a moment, she wants to burst into disbelieving laughter. If only it was as simple as her dad stepping out on the family. What an easy little problem to have. The kind of problem that any normal girl at school could have.

“He's not cheating, mom,” she says. When she sees the doubting look on Louise's face, she continues, “I… I was worried about the same thing a few weeks ago. So I asked him.”

Louise's brows rise in surprise. "And you believe him?"

Abigail hopes that the thing on her lips is an easy, convincing smile. "He wouldn't lie to me about that."

With a long sigh, Louise leans back in her chair, her shoulders slumping. Caecilius hops into her lap and she rubs behind one of his stubby ears. "That's… that's good, at least. But it does only raise more questions about his behavior."

"Um. I think I have an idea what it might be," Abigail says. "I think he's a little weirded out that in a little under a year I'll be presenting and Mel will be settling. It's probably hard for him to talk about. Mid-life crisis stuff, you know? You probably feel that way too sometimes, right?"

"Oh, Abby," Louise says. She stands and moves over to kneel and embrace her daughter. "Of course I do. But I'm mostly proud that you've grown into such a wonderful young woman."

The urge to laugh hysterically rises up in Abigail again. It's getting harder and harder to keep it bottled up the longer this farce goes on. Sometimes she isn't sure who will snap from the unacknowledged tension first: her or her dad.

"Thanks, mom," Abigail whispers, staring blankly to the tacky wallpaper in their cozy kitchen.

Louise pats her daughter's back and returns to her seat. Though she still looks tired, her face already looks brighter and less troubled. Guilt and envy wrestle for dominance in Abigail's mind, leaving a sour, curdling feeling deep in her gut.

"We'll have a family meeting tonight," Louise says. "It's healthy to get all this stuff out in the open. Clear the air. We haven't been communicating, and that's why the atmosphere has been so oppressive."

Abigail nods weakly. "Sounds good," she murmurs, turning her attention back to breakfast. The eggs are cold, the bacon wilted.

As she chews on a bite of soggy hashbrowns, she suddenly remembers the raven from earlier in the morning. She wonders if it was still in the truck when her dad drove off. If the bird is too afraid to fly up and away while the truck is in motion, then from its perspective it would be whisked away to a place far, far from where it started, separated from whatever small troubles it might have had here. A chance at a new life, unburdened.

She bites her tongue, tasting blood and envying the stupid animal.

AFTERNOON

The moment the truck finally slows to a stop, Aušrinė dislodges herself from where she has tucked herself away in the bed of the pickup. She ruffles her wind-swept feathers and does some quick preening. When she hears Hobbs' door open, she takes flight and heads for a low branch of a nearby tree. She settles down to observe.

Hobbs has driven out to a secluded hunter's cabin at the end of a long, meandering, and unpaved stretch of road. The cabin itself is well-built and well-maintained, at least from the outside. Given its size, it may have two floors, though the upper level would likely be on the small side. Aušrinė takes note of a narrow cobblestone chimney attached to the north wall.

She turns her attention back to Hobbs, who has opened the trailer to release his daemon. He rubs at the tip of the stag's muzzle, and together they proceed toward the cabin. Aušrinė hops along her branch in pursuit, causing a few leaves to fall as she moves.

There are three separate locks on the cabin door. Aušrinė watches the appealing gleam of Hobbs' keys in the late morning light as he works on the locks one by one.

Someone has something to hide, she thinks to Hannibal across miles and miles of distance. *Very exciting.*

I wish I could be there with you, Hannibal replies. *Whatever interesting things you find inside are probably best enjoyed in person.*

Aušrinė laughs. Once Hobbs and his daemon are inside, she flies over to land on the windowsill of one of the few windows on the cabin's first floor. What she sees inside is not very incriminating, but that doesn't surprise her. If he has any sense at all, he wouldn't leave out the blood and bone of murdered girls in a cabin with no blinds over its windows. The interior is simple and sparse, dominated by a large dark wooden table. Those unfamiliar with the art form would not think twice about the piece of furniture, but Aušrinė can appreciate the craftsmanship that went into Garrett Jacob Hobbs' butcher table.

She watches as Hobbs heaves the butcher table out of the way, revealing a floorboard with a metal mechanism built at one of its ends. Aušrinė's keen eyes can just make out that there are two oblong impressions in the metal that together form the shape of an elk hoof print. Hobbs' daemon moves toward the plate and then steps on it, shifting his weight until the plate slides neatly into the floor.

Clever, Aušrinė thinks. *Should we invest in some secret compartments with switches that can only be activated with my beak?*

Hannibal chuckles. *It's much more satisfying and effective to hide in plain sight, don't you think?*

True, true.

Hobbs removes the trick board and lifts up a small safe. He dials in the security code and slowly, reverently opens the door. He pulls out several pictures and pages of hand-scrawled notes. From what Aušrinė can see, the pictures all seem to be of young women with long, dark hair. She can't tell if they are photos of the current victims or of Hobbs' future prospects.

Hobbs spreads out the material over his butcher's table. His daemon moves to stand beside him, the stag's mighty antlers spreading over him like a canopy. The stag's dark eyes stare unblinking at the pictures of the girls.

Aušrinė hums to herself and hops back slightly from the window. She rears back and lunges forward, tapping her beak against the glass. She does not stay put despite the incredible temptation to see Hobbs and his daemon reel with the shock of the sound.

She flies to the roof of the cabin and looks back down to the ground below. Hobbs has rushed out into the bright light of high noon, a harrowed expression on his thin face. His daemon follows out behind, his nostrils flared and antlers lowered and threatening.

While Hobbs checks around the cabin, Aušrinė hops over to the chimney. She flaps up to perch at its rim and peers down the flue. No obvious obstructions and it certainly looks wide enough. Down she goes. There is ash in the chimney as she makes her way down to the bottom. It has a certain quality to it that she finds satisfyingly familiar. If sown into soil, it would provide incredibly rich and fertile results. The organic material makes the crops grow strong and hardy.

Aušrinė shakes some of the ash from her feathers. A small shard of bone clings to her left wing, and she picks it away deftly with her beak. She waits for the return of Hobbs and his daemon.

For how anxious and careful he seems, it takes him longer to notice her than she would have expected. When he does, he gasps. His shock quickly turns into disbelieving laughter, possibly thinking his paranoia ridiculous now that the source of his fear has been revealed to be a bird. “How'd you get in here, little fella?”

“Through the chimney,” Aušrinė replies simply.

Hobbs’ laughter dies in his throat and all the color drains out of his face. He steps back, stumbling against his daemon and grasping its course fur for stability. Once the surprise has run through his system, it turns to fury.

“Show yourself!” he shouts. But there is no obvious place for a person to hide in the sparse cabin. Hobbs runs toward the stairs that lead to the second floor, but he stops when Aušrinė clears her throat.

“Oh, you won't find my other half there,” she says. She spreads her wings wide. “Shall I make things clearer for you?”

She takes flight, darting elegantly between the stag’s long legs and out the door. She flies higher, finding an ideal tree about fifty feet away from the cabin. Landing on a branch with a soft fluttering of feathers and leaves, she turns back toward the cabin. Hobbs and his stag are in pursuit, but further behind than than if they had immediately followed her. She then realizes why: Hobbs took the time to grab one of his hunting rifles from the cabin.

Be careful, Aušrinė, Hannibal thinks, amusement in his voice. *I'd hate to drop dead in this sub-par hotel room because you were sloppy.*

I'm incapable of sloppiness, Aušrinė retorts haughtily.

She focuses her attention back to her quarry, tilting her head as Hobbs takes aim at her.

The gun quivers, and Aušrinė suspects that he has realized why she has flown to this particular tree. It stands separate from the other trees in the area by several yards. There is absolutely no way that Aušrinė's human has anything approaching a normal Tether. For many people, such a sight is wholly unnatural and unnerving, like watching a severed limb twitch when connected to a source of electricity.

Hobbs grits his teeth and stabilizes his gun. Behind him, the stag breathes heavily and furiously through his curled lip. “Who are you, Witch?” he asks.

Aušrinė laughs. “Witches are not the only ones who wander,” she says.

“What do you want?”

“A friendly warning from a bird of a feather. They're on your trail, and getting closer. It's only a matter of time. Perhaps mere hours,” Aušrinė says. “And, selfishly, I wanted to meet you before you're caught.”

Hobbs’ breath starts to come faster. “Why should I believe you?”

“I found you, didn't I?”

Hobbs curses and falls to his knees, holding his head in his hands as if suffering a splitting headache. Fascinated, Aušrinė watches as his life finally spins out of control.

“I'd hurry if I were you. You have so much to hide, so much to consider, and so very little time,” Aušrinė says, stretching her wings and preparing to depart. “If you see me again, you'll know the time has come.”

As she flies, she dodges the one shot Hobbs manages to shoot at her easily, thrilled and merry.

It takes Aušrinė around two hours to trace her Tether back to Hannibal's hotel room. It should be exhausting work, especially since her day is far from over. But there is a boundless energy that can be unlocked when one sets up a series of dominoes and prepares the flick that will send them all tumbling down in a beautiful, elaborate pattern.

When she swoops through the open window in their hotel room, she finds that Hannibal is already calling Will, Hobbs’ employment record in hand.

EVENING

Blood on his hands. Blood in his hair. Blood splattered across his glasses. Dust clinging to the cold, sticky gore clotted up to his wrist. Dust covering his clothes. Dust in his lungs.

Shudder. Blink. Rewind.

He is in the car outside the quaint, quintessentially midwestern residence that belongs to the Hobbs family. Will frowns, reaching up to scratch idly at his chin. There are two older cars in the driveway and a pickup and livestock trailer parked haphazardly on the street, one of the wheels up on the curb and blocking the sedans in the driveway. Everybody's home.

“What do we do next?” Hannibal asks from the passenger seat next to him. Aušrinė stands on the dashboard, staring at the house with her feathers slightly puffed out.

Will glances at the Alpha. “You wait here.”

Hannibal frowns. “Are you sure?”

“It's safest. If he's cooperative, good. If he's not…” He pauses for a moment, considering. “Have you ever fired a gun, Dr. Lecter?”

“Never at a person.”

“Then today is a terrible time to start.”

“I am a former trauma surgeon, however. If, God forbid, your scenario where Hobbs is uncooperative happens, my services may be useful,” Hannibal says.

Will doesn't think Hannibal is bringing it up out of wounded Alpha pride; he sounds like he genuinely wishes to help. But there's something about him that makes him less readable than the average person Will meets out there in the great, wide world. It's an unsettling feeling. Perhaps that in itself is the one foothold he can find on the otherwise impeccably smooth surface of Hannibal Lecter. Will Graham is a seasoned veteran of unsettling feelings, after all.

“Yeah. God forbid,” Will murmurs, turning again to look out the driver's side window toward the house.

Hannibal sighs. “You say it's safest if I wait here while you go ask your questions,” he says. “Safest for me, perhaps. But what about you?”

“I can handle myself,” Will says, bristling.

“It isn't my intent to doubt your abilities or dismiss you, Will,” Hannibal says patiently. “But better to have support and not need it than need support and not have it.”

Damnably practical, Sabine mutters.

“Fine. Point taken. But follow my lead,” Will says, opening his door and stepping out into the golden light of late afternoon. He hears Hannibal follow suit, shutting the passenger side door behind him.

His heart seems to beat faster with every step he takes toward the house. Once he has arrived at the oversized door, he pauses. He looks over his shoulder at Hannibal, who is walking several paces back behind him, Aušrinė perched on his right forearm. The raven is not looking towards the door, but rather at one of the house’s windows which is blocked by closed venetian blinds. Probably a wise decision; better to have multiple lines of sight in case Hobbs chooses to pull something.

Will turns his attention back to the door. He breathes deeply, brings his hand up, and knocks. No response. He knocks again.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs?” he calls. “This is-”

He hears a loud clattering inside followed by screams from two women. One of them is abruptly cut off, and Will’s blood runs cold. He hammers at the door. “FBI! Open the door!”

The door opens seconds before his fist would have landed against the wood again. A middle aged Omega woman falls down at the threshold, vibrant red blood spurting from a deep gash in her neck. Her eyes are wide and wild as she gazes up at Will, uncomprehending. Shaking, he drops down on one knee to press his hand against her wound.

Carotid, Sabine gasps through the horrific buzzing and ringing drowning out nearly all of his thoughts. *Done for.*

“No, no,” Will stammers, pressing harder against the woman’s throat. Soon, his hand has become entirely covered in her blood as it gushes unbidden out of her. She gasps and gags, slowly and weakly lifting her right hand to reach for something in the house.

Will’s terrified eyes dart up, looking for what she might be reaching for. A beaver daemon lies slumped in the foyer a few feet away. His tail twitches once, and then the tension drains out of his furry body. Will hears the woman’s hand fall to the floor with a thud the moment the daemon evaporates into a golden cloud of Dust.

They’re gone.

He stands and grabs for the gun tucked in his holster. Somehow his grip is strong and sure despite how slippery the dead woman’s blood is against the metal. Will proceeds into the house, following the sound of the other woman’s voice gasping quietly. He stops when he enters the kitchen.

Hobbs stands at the far end of the kitchen. Clutched in front of him as a shield is not another woman but a teenage girl, slightly too young to have presented yet. His daughter. As predicted by the profile work he'd done with Hannibal yesterday, she looks like her father's previous victims. She is strangely slack, her eyes staring out at nothing. He has a bloody knife at her pale throat.

Next to them Hobbs’ stag daemon looms over a prone and motionless yearling fawn daemon.

Reflexive traumatic mimicry, Sabine whispers. Will feels her mind whirring, but with the shock and chaos around him, it almost feels as if their communication through the Tether is compromised, like a bad radio transmission signal. Crackly and sparse. *Hopefully.*

“Let her go, Hobbs,” Will says, his voice level despite everything. “You don't want to hurt her. That's why you did everything you did, isn't it? That's why you went after proxies, so you could stave off the hunger calling for her blood.”

Hobbs grits his teeth. “Get out of my head,” he growls, tightening his grip on his daughter. The girl gasps, her blue eyes darting from Will to her shocked daemon to the knife in her father's hand.

“This can end quietly,” Will urges. “Peacefully.”

In the distance, he hears the sound of sirens approaching. Hannibal must have called Jack and the police. He wants to know where Hannibal is so he can have a better grasp on all the possible ways this stand-off could end but can't risk taking his eyes off Hobbs.

He hears the sound of quiet footsteps moving behind him. For one horrible moment, he wonders if Zeller's idea out in the field was right. That the killer who left the girl on the stag head truly was the Shrike - truly was Hobbs - and that he had an accomplice who helped him impale the girl's daemon. Will wonders if he, too, will be another victim of the Shrike and his supposed helper. But no sudden impalement happens, no gunshot rips through his spine.

“Will,” Hannibal murmurs.

Speak of the devil.

Hobbs looks out past Will, and his bloodshot eyes widen with terror. Maybe it's the creeping dread of knowing that he is outnumbered, maybe it's the ever-nearing scream of the sirens as they approach. Whatever it is, Will sees the moment where Hobbs has realized he has reached a dead end.

When some people reach that point, they crumple up and turn themselves over to the authorities with all the fight draining out of them like water through a sieve. Others will become full and overflow with aggression, lashing out and fighting to the very end. Others implode.

Time slows for Will when Hobbs looks over to his stag. The daemon shakes his muscular shoulders and starts to rear back on his hind legs. Will can see what will come next. The stag would bring down all of his powerful weight onto the fawn, crushing her head under his hooves. The girl's daemon will dissipate and she will die. Hobbs will turn his blade on himself having annihilated his family.

Will has only seconds to change that fate. There's an opening at Hobbs’ shoulder. If he aimed there, he could stun the Alpha and use the opportunity to shoot him at the core. He could pierce enough vital tissue to make it count. He steadies his hand.

But he does not shoot Hobbs in the shoulder. Instead, guided by an instinct he cannot name, Will pivots and shoots Hobbs’ daemon right through the neck.

The daemon lurches, unleashing a horrific, gurgling bellow as time races to catch up with Will. Things are now moving fast, too fast for him to fully process his actions. He shoots again and again and again into the stag until his gun clicks over and over with an empty round. The wounds erupt into geysers of golden Dust.

The stag dissipates before he can crush the fawn beneath him. The shower of Dust covers the kitchen, and Will hopes it is his adrenaline-gorged brain playing tricks on him when he feels tiny phantom pin pricks where he suspects the dead daemon's Dust would pass through his flesh. Sabine quivers in his pocket but says nothing.

But Hobbs does not die. He lurches with every shot that tears through his daemon. With the final shot that obliterates the stag, he breathes in deeply, glares at Will, and slits his daughter's throat before slumping down against the kitchen cabinets.

The girl partially startles out of her traumatized stupor as the blood begins to drain out of her. Will darts over to her, dropping the gun at her side. He tries to press her wound closed as he had with her mother. Her blood is hot and sticky between his fingers, and he's still too shaken to feel relief when he processes that the girl's injury is much shallower than her mother's. He doesn't even realize that he is pressing a hand covered with her mother's blood into the girl's neck.

He gasps when he feels a broad, warm hand against his right bicep. He looks up to find Hannibal kneeling over him. Gently, the psychiatrist removes Will's shaking hand from the girl's throat, replacing it with his own. There's something glinting in his strange eyes. Surprise, respect, awe, and other things Will can't begin to name. It's gone in an instant as Hannibal turns his attention to administering first aid.

The sirens shriek just outside. Running footsteps and shouting voices approach. Some familiar, others strangers. Gasps of horror when they see Hobbs against the cabinets, his chest still rising and falling despite the death of his daemon. The rare, tortuous half-death that Will has inflicted on him.

“See,” Hobbs whispers as he stares at Will. “See you…”

And Will does feel seen. Not just seen, but seen-*through* - transparent and insubstantial. A living ghost, just like how Hobbs must feel.

Hobbs finally dies over a minute after his daemon passed.

Shudder. Blink.

Blood on his hands. Blood in his hair. Blood splattered across his glasses. Dust clinging to the cold, sticky gore clotted up to his wrist. Dust covering his clothes. Dust in his lungs.

He is back in his present and somehow outside the house now. Will doesn't remember leaving the kitchen, let alone the house. He can hear Jack's commanding voice inside giving instructions. He wonders if Jack gave him anything to do. If he did, it's been obliterated by the blast site in his mind.

He must have been following Hannibal and the girl after the medics strapped her and her daemon to a stretcher and wheeled her out to the waiting ambulance. He watches as they load her in, taking care to avoid touching her daemon more than necessary even though they all wear special medical gloves to minimize the discomfort of the otherwise taboo touch. Her eyes are fluttering, torn between consciousness and oblivion. The fawn lies still, her breath shallow enough to nearly avoid detection. The fact that she has not dissolved into Dust is the only indication that she is not dead.

Hannibal climbs in after her. He looks up, seeing Will adrift in their wake. When one of the medics starts to close the ambulance door, he holds up a hand to stop him. It's covered in the

girl's blood, glinting red and blue with the vehicle's flashing lights.

He reaches out, offering his bloody hand to help Will inside. Will blinks, then steps forward, accepting the offer with his own blood-covered hand.

A Murmuration

Chapter Notes

New chapter! This time, the chapter notes are at my dreamwidth, and you can click here to go directly to it. The voting on the previous chapter was pretty split, with dreamwidth and twitter getting the most votes. So... that's what I'll be doing. The longer notes will go on dreamwidth, and I'll be trying to be more contactable/posting small status updates on my twitter which you can find here. Feel free to follow me on either platform. This is part of a new system I'm testing out since Tumblr screwed up so badly last month. Their dumb decisions didn't effect me personally, but a LOT of people had huge chunks of their fandom history imperiled and I'm not down with that. Especially since a lot of innocent people were hit hard while many actual creeps don't seem impacted at all. Eee-yikes.

I'm not sure when the next chapter, ~~A Convocation~~ (edit 2/20/19 - the next chapter is going to be called "A Game" while "A Convocation" will follow that), will be ready. I'll try to get it out this month, but January is a weird month with me that comes with a lot of emotional baggage. I'll probably explain on twitter later this month. But this chapter is around 8000 words long, so hopefully it'll tide everyone over? ;)

Last thing: there is a character in this chapter who I will not be tagging until next chapter. She's just a cameo, but I thought it would be fun for people to spot her instead of just reading her cameo bit in the tags. A little treat for the people who are following this chapter-by-chapter, I guess.

As always, thank you for your patience, and I appreciate any thoughts you may have! Let's a-go!

The next few days move in a blur for Will. One moment he is kneeling in the back of a crowded ambulance, watching the medics and Hannibal discuss the first aid that the psychiatrist had administered to the girl as they try to keep her blood from spilling any further. The next, he is blinking awake on a squeaky faux-leather seat in a sterile hospital waiting room, the sharp clicking of elk hooves fading into the shadows of his rattled mind. Another and he is back home in Wolf Trap, his dogs frolicking around Sabine as he sits on his porch and stares out into the rustling dark of the woods. Once more, and he is sitting in Jack's office with Alana Bloom at his right and Hannibal Lecter at his left.

Alana’s perfectly painted lips are slightly pinched with clear disapproval. Her body language only betrays her feelings further, with her arms crossed tightly across her chest and her back ramrod straight. Valerian, her peacock daemon, perches on the back of her chair with his beautiful tail plumage cascading down over Alana’s right shoulder.

In contrast, Hannibal seems much more relaxed. His posture is impeccable as always, but there is an ease and certainty in the way his legs are crossed and the curious tilt of his head. Aušrinė stands on his knee, her dark eyes fixed on Jack.

Very emergency parent-teacher conference, Sabine thinks. *Just like the time we got caught smoking under the bleachers in 9th grade.*

Not quite the same, Will notes bitterly. *Dad was mostly mad that we were caught with the brand he hated.*

He can try to cover his feelings up with a thick layer of detached irony, but the sting against his pride is still there all the same. He's sure it isn't intentional, but he can't help but feel intensely aware of the optics of his current situation. The poor little unstable Omega, surrounded by the Alphas who all think that they know what's best for him. He shouldn't worry his pretty, empty little head about any of it. It makes some dark, poisonous pit inside of him rumble ominously.

He focuses on Jack and the tap-tap-tap of his thick fingers against the wood of his desk. He is reading a report that must be a summary of the Hobbs case. Will risks a look up to his supervisor's face, which is stony and unreadable. Jack's eyes flick up from the report and catch Will's own, and Will quickly looks away.

Jack sighs and leans back into his office chair, reaching down to rest his right hand on Themis's head. “Less than a week from when I asked you to join the Shrike team to successfully locating and neutralizing Hobbs,” he says. “You couldn't ask for faster results than that. The conclusion wasn't as clean as we'd like, but the casualties were still minimized.”

Will's stomach churns. He thinks of Louise Hobbs’ bloody body, her eyes wide and sightless in death. He thinks of Abigail, comatose and scarred in her hospital room. He thinks of Hobbs himself during the horrible moments between the death of his daemon and the death of his body, seeing Will for who he truly is and knowing the things he so desperately tries to hide. They don’t feel like minimized damage. He feels like a natural disaster that has wiped out an entire unprepared village.

“I'll cut to the chase,” Jack says. He removes his hand from his daemon and puts his elbows on his desk, clasping his strong hands together. “I want you out in the field. Permanently.”

Alana sucks in a quick breath and holds it for a moment. She looks livid.

Jack holds up a hand to cut her off. “Obviously we have some things to clear up before we can get to that.”

“‘Some things’?” Alana repeats in disbelief. “Jack, when I discussed Will's empathy and deductive abilities with you, I recommended him strictly as a consultant. I did not and do not approve of field work for Will.”

“With all due respect, Will isn't your patient, Dr. Bloom,” Jack replies. “You waived the right to give the final word on what is or is not best for him when you chose not to accept my offer

to work with him. Dr. Lecter, on the other hand, has accepted that role, and his professional opinion is the only one I'm interested in right now."

Will can feel his molars grinding in the back of his head as his colleagues speak over him. He slouches back in his chair, fists clenching. He glances over to Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. Aside from a minuscule rising of his brow, his expression is unchanged.

Jack and Alana both turn their attention to Hannibal, their faces tight with identical intent despite being on opposite sides of their conflict. Hannibal clears his throat. "I would need to spend more time with Will in order to have enough data to provide my professional opinion on his fitness for field service."

Will's stomach drops. He knows a fancy vote of no confidence when he hears one. It was stupid to even begin to think otherwise. Of course Lecter would be just like all the others who have dismissed him so casually.

But just when Will's thoughts are about to fully spiral out into bitter pessimism, Hannibal continues. "But there is a matter more important than that," he says. "I am disappointed at the way this meeting has been playing out. I respect both of you, so I hope you take this as kindly criticism and not as personal judgement or scorn. Jack, you believe Will should be out in the field. Alana, you believe the opposite. But neither of you have asked Will what he wants, despite him being here in the room with us. I'm sure none of us would appreciate being treated in such a way."

Will's negative thoughts grind to an abrupt and confused halt. His fists unclench and his head snaps up to turn to Hannibal, who glances back at him with a small smile on his lips. Sabine squirms in his pocket just over his heart, her thoughts a whirl and difficult to track.

He looks away. "I was about to start screaming at all three of you," he grumbles. "Might still do it."

"I'm so sorry, Will," Alana says. She has grace enough for genuine remorse to ring in her voice. "I'm just concerned. I want what's best for you, and after what happened with Hobbs, I don't think that's field work."

"Hannibal is right. I also apologize for jumping the gun," Jack says. He pauses for a moment. "What *do* you want, Will?"

"Besides a stiff drink?"

Jack laughs. Alana does not.

Will sighs and brings a hand up to scratch at the unruly curls at the back of his head. "I don't… I don't want to feel the heavy psychological weight of knowing that people died because there was something I could do, but refused."

"You shouldn't think that way, Will," Alana says. "By that logic, every firefighter would feel guilty that they don't extinguish every fire across the globe. Every police officer would feel guilty that they didn't arrest every criminal lurking in the shadows. We're only human."

“I know it isn't logical,” Will says shaking his head. “But I still feel it.”

“Maybe it's my own bias, but that sounds like you want to keep working in the field to me,” Jack says. “Am I right?”

Will swallows heavily and makes sure to look away in such a way that he won't be able to see the disappointment and disapproval on Alana's face. “You're not wrong.”

That seems to be good enough for Jack, as he nods with satisfaction. “Excellent. The higher-ups do have a few stipulations for your service, but we can work through them.”

“Like what?”

“Like regular supportive therapy with an approved psychiatrist,” Jack says. “Assuming you pass the psychological evaluation.”

“How regular?” Will grumbles.

“At least once a week.”

Sabine groans with disgust through their Tether, and for one petty moment, Will is tempted to change his answer completely to side with Alana. The idea of weekly appointments with someone all too eager to dig into his brain and root around for points of interest sounds like a far too high price to pay for field work.

“Do I at least have veto power if the shrink you pick turns out to be completely unbearable?”

“You seemed to get along well enough with Dr. Lecter in Minnesota,” Jack says.

For some reason, Will hadn't considered that Hannibal would be the one Jack would turn to for this. If the higher-ups are concerned enough about Will's stability that they are mandating therapy for him, it would stand to reason that they'd want at least a second opinion. It feels like an oversight. But that doesn't mean he can't take advantage of it.

“I just don't know Dr. Lecter well enough to hate him yet,” Will replies. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Hannibal's smile widen with amusement. “But... I've met worse psychiatrists.”

“I would be more than happy to take on the task,” Hannibal says. He turns his head toward Alana. “Unless, of course, Alana has changed her mind about acting as Will's therapist.”

“That… that would be ill-advised,” Alana says quietly.

Will presses his lips together tightly, stung once again.

“Dr. Lecter it is, then. Now, there was one other thing that the higher-ups want to know. And I'll admit, it's been eating at me as well,” Jack says.

There's a definite shift in the atmosphere around him, from the satisfaction of getting his way to a dark intensity that makes the already tense air in the room even heavier. The other shoe is

about to drop.

Jack sets his jaw and pins Will with an appraising stare. “Why did you shoot Hobbs’ daemon?”

Even knowing that the question had to be coming, it still hits Will like a lead ball to the chest. Completely unhelpfully, Sabine starts replaying the event through their Tether. Seeing a safe opening for a shot to Hobbs’ body, pivoting to the stag, the kickback and strain as he shoots over and over.

“I don't know,” he says. As the words leave his lips, he isn't sure if it's a lie or not.

Jack blinks. “That isn't a very encouraging answer, Will,” he says coolly. “Maybe you should try to rephrase that.”

“Don’t try to lead him, Jack,” Alana chastises.

All the attention and all the pressure is starting to make beads of sweat prickle on his temples and down his back. He opens his mouth and takes a breath to try to fulfill the impossible task of explaining something that truly has no reasonable explanation. But before he can say anything else, Hannibal speaks.

“What Will is going through is a perfectly reasonable and healthy reaction given the circumstances,” he says. “People who have experienced a trauma often have a cloudy or confusing recollection of it. But fortunately, Will was not alone in that kitchen.”

“Abigail Hobbs is still unconscious. She can't vouch for anything right now,” Jack says.

“I can,” Hannibal says simply. “I arrived in the kitchen moments before the shooting.”

“And?”

“And Will had no other option but the one he took. There was no clean shot for him if he had targeted Hobbs’ body. He would have hit the girl.”

Why is he lying for us? Sabine asks, her voice quaking.

Will doesn't have an answer. He stares at Hannibal, perplexed and relieved and suspicious in equal measure.

“And you'd be willing to testify to that fact on the record?” Jack asks.

“Absolutely.”

“Right now?”

“Of course.”

Jack nods and glances at his wristwatch. “Will, you're due to teach your class in 15 minutes. You're dismissed for now. Dr. Lecter and I will be in touch for the next steps in this process.

Dr. Lecter, if you have a few minutes, I'd like to complete the paperwork necessary to keep you advising Will."

Still rather stunned, it takes a few seconds for Jack's words to penetrate Will's mind. When they finally do, he hurries to his feet, his chair moaning against the floor with his sudden motion. He mutters his agreement and leaves without a further word to anyone.

A few paces down the hall, he hears the tell-tale clack of heels behind him. "Will!" Alana calls. "Wait, please."

He turns to see Alana walking briskly toward him. Valerian struts behind her, his majestic tail trailing behind him. Her face is a bit paler than usual, and her eyes are full of worry.

"I just want to apologize again," she says sheepishly.

Will shrugs awkwardly. "You meant well."

"It's all a bit much, isn't it?" she says, smiling faintly. But the expression is already dissipating from her lips like a single drop of rain evaporating against sweltering hot pavement. "Are you sure about this? Jack can be extremely forceful, and I don't want you to be pressured into something you don't want."

"I'm fine," Will says. "It's my choice."

"Still-"

In his pocket, Sabine writhes irritably. He feels a quick, strange jolt, almost like being suddenly stung by a bee. She thinks something testy, and to Will's surprise, he finds the same words leaving his lips in a rush. "If you're that concerned about me being pressured, you'll stop second-guessing me and trying to shelter me like a wounded baby lamb."

Alana blinks, taken aback. For a moment, she looks at him as if she has never seen him before in her life.

"Shit," Will mutters, running his hand over his face. "Sorry, I… that just kind of slipped out. I'm not running on much sleep, and so much has happened-"

"No, you're right," Alana says. "It was a bit hypocritical of me, I'll admit. I'm sorry I didn't respect your wishes. But if you decide it's too much, there's no shame in taking a step back. Don't hurt yourself, Will."

"Thanks. Um. Gotta go. Class. Bye," Will mutters, turning and hurrying off, his face burning with embarrassment.

Why did I say that? he asks Sabine as they leave Alana behind. *What was that?*

I don't know, Sabine says, her voice hesitant. *That thought was just for us. If it happens again, we should look into it. We can't just blurt out our secrets like that.*

It lingers in the back of his head, a half-worry, all through his class and through the rest of the work day.

*****

Later that evening, Will travels all the way to Johns Hopkins up in Baltimore. He arrives at a quarter to nine, at the tail end of visiting hours.

As he walks through the sterile hallways, passing people saying their goodbyes to their loved ones for the night, he struggles to figure out why he's here. Concern, perhaps. Guilt, certainly. But mostly it's an emotion he struggles to name, something foreign and intrusive like a virus his body is not equipped to handle. Time will tell if it ravages him or if he builds up antibodies.

He stops in front of the door to Abigail Hobbs' room. Taking a deep breath, he reaches for the cold metal door handle and enters.

To his surprise, it isn't just Abigail Hobbs and her daemon in the room. Sitting in one of the two chairs for visitors is Hannibal, who is reading a book in a language Will does not immediately recognize. Aušrinė notices Will first, and she hops from the back of the chair to Hannibal's shoulder and then down to his knee. Her dark tail feathers twitch with excitement as she observes her new guests.

"Why are you here?" Will asks.

"The same reason you're here, I imagine," Hannibal says, closing his book and folding his hands across its aged cover. "A pull. Concern for her well-being, responsibility for her circumstances… possibly both."

"It's not your fault she's here."

"In some way, isn't it?" Hannibal says, tilting his head. "When I found Hobbs' file in the hotel room, I didn't intervene when you suggested we go his residence right away. I could have insisted that we wait until Jack and the rest of his team were available as backup."

"That just makes it my fault," Will mutters, looking down at the floor.

"Your choices and mine have merged together to place us on the path we currently walk. Change either one and the world is altered irrevocably," Hannibal says. He looks over to the unconscious girl in the hospital bed. "Change either one and she is little more than a stain on the floor of her own home and a black-and-white school photo in an obituary."

Will swallows heavily and steps forward, reaching for the armrest of the other chair. He sinks down to sit and looks at Abigail Hobbs as well. Other than the breathing equipment and the layers of bandages wrapped around her neck, she just looks like she's sleeping. A medium-sized daemon hospital bed sits beside her own, and inside her daemon is still in the form of a yearling elk fawn.

"How is she?" Will asks without taking his eyes off her.

“Recovering. She hasn't woken yet, but she will in her own time. Even when she does wake, it's important not to rush her. It's not just her body that will need to heal.”

Will nods. He pauses for a moment, just listening to the whirring and beeping of the machinery. After a moment, he clears his throat. “Why did you lie to Jack?”

“I'm afraid I don't know what you mean.”

“Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about,” Will warns. “I had a clean shot at Hobbs’ shoulder. I could have hit him without shooting his daemon. But I didn't. You had to have seen it.”

“I did,” Hannibal admits, reaching out and stroking at the dark feathers on Aušrinė's head. “But in this instance, I don't think it's worthwhile to dwell on what-ifs. Maybe shooting him in the shoulder would have been enough to incapacitate the daemon and prevent him from crushing his daughter. Maybe it wouldn't have, and he would have killed his own child soul-first. We can't know what happened in any world where you shot Hobbs’ shoulder. We must focus on making the world that we have the finest one possible.”

“Jack is going to think I had no other viable choice,” Will says. He chuckles, but there is no mirth in the sound. It's more several sharp exhalations of disbelief. “If he finds out otherwise…”

“Then he will sweep it under the rug in order to keep you as an asset,” Hannibal says. “Men like Jack Crawford pride themselves on having a rock solid moral foundation. And, to be fair, they do. They prize justice above all else. If something unseemly must be done in the interest of furthering their perception of justice, they will do it.”

Will laughs again and this time there's a bit more heart in it. “A rather grim assessment.”

“A useful one,” Hannibal says, smiling. “Something to keep in mind.”

“I'll try. But what confuses me about the whole thing is that I don't even know why I did it,” Will admits quietly.

“Hopefully that reason will become illuminated during therapy,” Hannibal says.

Aušrinė hops around on Hannibal's knee to face her human. “Don't forget the letter,” she says.

Once again, Will is struck with the strangeness of seeing a daemon who speaks such small internal matters aloud so frequently. As he watches Hannibal reach down for a fine leather briefcase at the foot of his chair, he idly wonders what Hannibal and his daemon keep to themselves.

Hannibal opens the briefcase and removes a sheet of paper. “I'm glad we met each other here,” he says as he hands the paper to Will. “It means I was able to show this to you earlier than otherwise.”

Will looks over the letter, noting that it is handwritten in elegant calligraphy. His brows slowly knit into a confused grimace as he reads. Upon finishing, he looks up at Hannibal with confusion. “This is my psych evaluation.”

“So it is.”

“You said you needed more time with me to determine if I was fit for field service.”

“Something said to please both Jack and Alana in order to stop them from speaking over you,” Hannibal explains. “It sounds like a ‘yes’ to Jack and a healthy and careful hesitancy to Alana. And, now that we've spoken a bit more here, it is also conveniently true. My initial internal assessment of you deems you fit for field service. Congratulations.”

Will returns the letter to Hannibal before leaning back in his chair and regarding the strange Alpha. “First impressions are rarely completely accurate,” he says. “What if I'm just good at hiding things?”

Hannibal smiles. “It's the job of any decent psychiatrist to find the hidden and obscured, even the things that the patient has hidden from themselves.”

Before Will can reply, he hears a soft murmur come from the hospital bed. It startles him, and he turns around in his chair towards the sound. Abigail's dark eyebrows are turned down sharply, and her eyes dart rapidly beneath their lids.

Is she waking up? Sabine asks as she crawls out of Will's pocket to see. Splotches of red start to appear down her side where she senses Aušrinė's keen eyes peering at her.

After only a few seconds, Abigail's expression smoothes out and slackens until all of the tension has drained from her. She does not wake up.

“It may have been a nightmare,” Hannibal says. “The brain activity of people in medically induced comas don't normally show the patterns typical of dreaming, yet many previously comatose patients report very vivid dreams when they wake. One of the human mind's many interesting little contradictions.”

Will frowns. “Do you think she could hear anything that we said?”

Before Hannibal can reply, a young, tired-looking nurse opens the door and peers inside. Her tiny pygmy marmoset daemon clings to the strawberry blonde hair braided at the top of her head, his amber eyes bleary and half-lidded. “I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over. You can come see your daughter again tomorrow.”

Will's shoulders tense and he blanches. Mortified, Sabine darts back into her pocket. “She's not… we're not…”

“Thank you, miss,” Hannibal says, standing and smoothing his suit jacket as Aušrinė flutters to perch on his shoulder. “We'll be out shortly.”

The nurse nods slowly, confused by the two very different reactions, and backs out and away.

“How can she work in this ward and not know Abigail's story?” Will hisses as he gets ready to leave. "It was national news."

“Not everyone in a hospital is given the same information about a patient, even a very high-profile or notable one,” Hannibal says. He holds the door open for Will. “Not everyone is informed on national matters. And if not either of those options, she was clearly at the end of a very long shift and tired enough to have temporarily forgotten the details.”

As they leave the room, Will takes one last look at Abigail, wondering what dark dreams and disjointed memories may be playing out beneath her eyelids.

It's just Will's luck that, less than 24 hours from now, Jack will call him out to the field again for a case involving the murder of a family.

*****

Will sits at the head of the table, honored and adored before a feast laid out for a king with an unrefined palate. The various offerings include: store-bought freezer aisle chicken tenders, boxed macaroni and cheese, perfectly toasted triangles of grilled cheese sandwiches, and a bowl of salad that comes across as more of a vague, hopeful suggestion than anything else.

Although he may be the honored subject of this feast, he is not alone. He looks to his left and sees a Beta man with a tortoiseshell cat daemon and a boy in his middle teens stare at him with blank, unblinking eyes. He turns to his right and sees a Beta woman with a German Shepherd daemon and a little girl gaze at him with equally blank expressions. The children's daemons appear as vague, grey splotches, not unlike vision that has been obscured by glaucoma. With the children unsettled, it would be impossible for Will to even begin to guess what their daemons looked like when they died.

Will reaches forward and lifts a glass filled with a cloudy purple liquid. He blinks and the family around him has moved, all holding up their glasses just like he has.

“Cheers,” he says. “To your health.”

He blinks again, and the family is all in the process of drinking from their glasses. He blinks one final time, and all members of this ill-fated family lie face-down with their bodies twisted in agony.

Will takes a deep, stabilizing breath and brings his own glass to his lips. The liquid is sweet, almost unbearably so, but it is certainly familiar. His father's financial situation rarely afforded him name-brand products, but he had the store-brand generic equivalent countless times during the humid, sticky summers of his childhood. It's grape-flavored Kool Aid.

Will opens his eyes and takes in a stuttering breath when the first thing he sees is the open, glassy eyes of Mrs. Turner. He winces away, careful to focus on some of the slowly rotting food instead of to any of the other bodies. Will sees spots of white-green mold across several of the dishes, shriveled and wilted lettuce in the salad, and a sweaty sheen of early decay on the macaroni.

“They were poisoned,” Will says, his eyes scanning over the mostly empty glasses. Sticky, drying purple residue clings to the bottom of the daughter's glass.

Beside him, Jack Crawford stands with his arms crossed over his chest. He wears a breathing mask. Themis lurks behind him, a muzzle with a protective nose covering over her snout. Her ears are pulled back, irritated and distracted.

“Not many poisons work fast enough to kill while they're still at the table,” Jack says.

“Either they drank at the start of the meal, or they weren't allowed to leave the table for a couple of hours,” Will says. He frowns at the bodies. “Or they didn't want to leave. Had a lot to talk about.”

“I'd put money on water hemlock,” Jimmy says as he swabs a sample from the girl's glass and puts it in a plastic bag. Like Will, he is not wearing a mask, though Minerva clings to one of his legs, looking a bit woozy. “It's got a real nasty neurotoxin. Less than an hour after you consume it, it causes some really horrible seizures. It can only take a few hours to die. Less if you accidentally choke on your own vomit.”

“And it wiped out a whole family,” Jack says, shaking his head.

“Maybe not all wiped out,” Beverly says as she strides into the dining room from the hallway. Like Jack, she and Hartwin are both wearing special breathing masks. Her long, confident steps falter as she gets closer to the table. She recoils and clasps a hand over her masked nose. “Ugh, God.”

“One of the worst things I've ever smelled, and I've been in this business a long time,” Jack agrees. He turns to Will and Jimmy. “Be glad Omegas and Betas don't have noses as sensitive as Alphas.”

“It's still pretty bad,” Will mutters.

And it is. There's a strangely sweet, greasy quality to the air that feels somehow thick in his lungs with every breath. The tell-tale odor of decay. Truth be told, he could probably stand to have a mask himself, but if he's here to make connections based on data, it would be illogical to willingly deprive himself of one of his senses.

Beverly makes another disgusted sound. “Anyway,” she says, her voice slightly muffled. “I was out speaking with the local cops who found the bodies after Mr. Turner's parents requested a wellness check. Just over a year ago, their middle child, Jesse, was abducted.”

“No body recovered?” Jack asks.

“Tips poured in like a river until drying up completely about six months ago.”

“Most child and adolescent abductions end pretty fast,” Will says. His mouth twists into a sour frown. “One way or another.”

“So, uh… am I the only one thinking this might be a murder-suicide?” Zeller asks as he moves in to get a close-up photograph of Mrs. Turner. “One of their kids goes missing, they

have a year for all their fear and heartbreak to go toxic, and then they decide to join Jesse in death. They make a feast of Jesse's favorite foods and then go out with the cult classic of literally drinking the Kool-Aid."

"No. It wasn't the parents. Someone else was definitely here," Will says.

"Also it was Flavor Aid in Jonestown," Price adds helpfully. "Just your fun daily cult fact."

"Wait a minute," Zeller says, frowning in confusion. "There's something in the mother's neck."

He reaches down, threading his gloved hands through the Omega woman's hair and sweeping it away. The hair at her nape is knotted with dark, clotted blood, though not as much as one would expect from a killing blow. Embedded just at the base of her skull is a smooth, finely-shaped arrowhead made from a silver metal laced with flecks of iridescent green.

Beverly crowds in, gawking at the arrowhead. "That looks like a real Witch arrow."

Jack curses beneath his breath. "I have to go make a call."

"Are you going to ask Calanthia for help?" Beverly calls after Jack as he walks out of the room, her voice eager and excited.

Zeller rolls his eyes. "Ugh, not you and your weird crush again."

"She's super hot!"

"She's 600 years older than you!"

"So? She can rob my cradle any day."

As Zeller groans with disgust, Will turns to Jimmy. "I, uh… assume Calanthia is a Witch."

"Yep," Price says. "She's part of the… oh, what was it… ah! Monongahela River clan out in West Virginia. Pretty sure it's the closest one to Quantico. She's more understanding and patient with humans than a lot of Witches are, so she's the FBI's main contact when Witch things come up."

Will swallows heavily. He reaches out for Sabine mentally, hoping that they can lean on each other if things get too uncomfortable. She reaches back, but it's weak and distracted. Already remembering the sting of the first and last time they met a Witch.

"And, uh… do Witch things come up often?"

"Oh, hell no. I've only met her once," Jimmy says. "They mostly keep to themselves and leave us humans to our short, inconsequential little lives. We'd be in pretty deep trouble if they didn't. But I know she's been a reference for the government since well before any of us were born. And it's not like she has a phone, so I guess Jack inherited some magical way of contacting her when he got promoted."

Will nods vaguely and turns back to look at the arrowhead. Beverly and Zeller are still arguing, but their words fade as Will concentrates. He remembers the sounds of bellowing bullfrogs and the soft murmur of mosquitoes against his ear, the noises of the bayou as all the creatures of the night stir. The glint of one of those arrows in the early moonlight, aimed at his heart.

He startles when he feels Price lay a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Are you weirded out by Witches like Brian is?” he asks. “You shouldn't worry about it. Just show enough respect and you'll be fine.”

We'll just make ourselves scarce when she's here, Sabine mutters. *Find a corner to hide away in. Blend in. It's what we do best.*

Fortunately, Jack and Themis come back into the dining room before Will feels socially compelled to discuss Witches any more with Jimmy. Beverly and Zeller's argument abruptly ends once the boss is back, and they scramble to look busy.

“It'll take Calanthia a few hours to fly here,” Jack explains. “We'll get her opinion when she arrives. We've got a hell of a lot to do until then, so let's get back to work.”

Over the next few hours, they tag, photograph, document, and scan the living room using Rusakov-filtered lenses. Thankfully, there is very little residual Dust, so they quickly rule out any daemon-less lingering on the part of the Turners. One less tragedy to add to the already unbearably large pile.

As they work, the shape of the murder begins to solidify more in Will's mind. He keeps coming back to the arrow. The more he has thought about it, the more confident he is that it is something ceremonial, and that when the tests come back they will determine that Mrs. Turner died of poisoning like the rest of her family, not from an arrow to the base of her skull. It's there to make a point, not as a practical means of causing death.

He has a hunch. And no better time to investigate it than when the Witch is probably getting close to arriving.

“Most parents who lose a child to abduction or running away keep their room exactly as the child left it. You can get a lot of information out of something frozen in time like that,” Will says to Jack. “Has anyone checked out Jesse's bedroom?”

“Do whatever you need to do to figure this out,” Jack says. “But I can tell you that the local police said there's a fine layer of dust on everything in there. Looks undisturbed. Whoever did this didn't step foot in Jesse's room.”

Will nods. “I just want to know we're working with,” he says as he heads for the hallway.

Although Will could clearly see from the size and design of the Turner home that the family was well-to-do, the thing that really drives it home for him is the fact that the three children all had their own large, separate bedrooms decorated to cater to their tastes. He only glimpses at the bedrooms of Jesse's older brother and younger sister. Hockey posters and trophies

adorn the boy's room, while the girl's features a plethora of stuffed dinosaurs and colorful string lights shaped like smiling ghosts.

The old houseboat Will grew up on as it drifted from port to port, season to season was small enough that it was barely enough space for his dad and himself. Having all that space and the means to decorate it with more than just old books from library inventory sales and a few toys from thrift stores is almost an alien concept, even now, over 15 years since he started living on his own.

The theme of Jesse's room is fantasy. He has action figures and models on shelves lining his walls, and his bookcase is far larger and better stocked than either of his siblings. His bed, which is neatly made with sheets that prominently feature a rune-like symbol that Will does not immediately recognize, has dozens of letters from his family laid out across it. Messages of love, support, hope, and pleading for Jesse to come home safely. The unread prayers of a dead family.

As he stares at the letters, he hears Beverly call out, “Calanthia's here!”

“Who's the kid with her?” Zeller asks.

Will moves quietly towards Jesse's doorway, hoping to get just close enough to listen in without being detected. He can just barely hear the conversation as it happens rooms away.

“Thank you for coming out here on such short notice, Calanthia,” Jack says.

“No trouble, Agent Crawford,” says a warm, mature woman's voice.

“Look, I don't know if Jack told you, but this is a really nasty crime scene,” Zeller says. “There are dead kids here. It's not the kind of thing you should show to your, uh…”

Even though he isn't with them, Will can still feel the crackling energy of the offended Witch. It fills the air with a charge not unlike static electricity; Will wonders if he'd be shocked if he reached out to touch the doorknob.

“She is my apprentice and the heir to my work,” Calanthia proclaims. “When you have died of old age and your bones have turned to dust, when your name is lost to your descendants’ lips, she will still be young and vibrant. Know your place before you tell me what is best for my student, child.”

Will shudders and steps back into Jesse's room as he vaguely hears Zeller gushing apologies. Jimmy wasn't kidding when he said that Calanthia was an uncommonly patient Witch. If someone had said something like that to the only Witch Will has met, he's sure she would have killed them for the insult.

As he moves further within Jesse's room, he finds himself drawn to the missing boy's bookshelf. The books are all science fiction and fantasy series, some old classics and others Will has never heard of. One shelf attracts Will's attention in particular.

There's clearly more care and interest placed in the arrangement of this shelf's contents than the others. The books all belong to the same series and feature titles like *Gallagher Dare and the Bizarre Birthright*, *Gallagher Dare and the Hidden Histories*, *Gallagher Dare and the Evasive Enchantment*, and *Gallagher Dare and the Surreptitious Settling*. The books are surrounded by knick-knacks and tie-ins: an empty branded candy tin filled with pens and pencils, some toys, and a few notebooks.

Will examines the toys more closely. One is a boy with dark, curly hair, a crooked nose, and a cuckoo daemon on his shoulder. Another is a girl in a billowing white dress with a mop of frizzy red hair on her head and a patch of freckles across her snub nose. A falcon daemon perches on her extended wrist with his wings splayed out valiantly. The final figure is of a pale, platinum blond-haired boy wearing an expensive and finely-tailored peacoat and trousers, an ocelot daemon slinking around from behind his legs.

The more Will looks over the items on the shelf, the more he realizes that the series seems vaguely familiar. He's never read them, of course, but he did see promotional materials and displays in bookstores a few years ago. Obviously loved and popular enough to have a dedicated following from kids like Jesse, but overshadowed in the greater cultural landscape by more prominent competition.

He reaches out and carefully removes the first book in the series, *Gallagher Dare and the Bizarre Birthright*, and reads the description on the inside of the dust jacket.

Gallagher Dare thought he was an ordinary 12-year-old boy living with his father and mother in a small village outside London. When strange things begin to happen around his home and his daemon Hecate is plagued with strange dreams about an unfamiliar woman who claims to be his mother, Gallagher finds himself drawn towards a clan of Witches in Ireland. They're the only ones who can help him uncover the secrets that have long been kept from him. But it's impossible for a boy to have Witch powers… isn't it?

As he finishes reading, Will feels eyes on the back of his neck. Slowly, he turns to look over his shoulder.

A pale, skinny girl of around thirteen is standing in the hallway just outside Jesse's room, peering in at him with strangely perceptive grey eyes. She clutches a large branch of blood-drop maple in her hands, a few vibrantly red leaves clinging to the branch's stems. Will has only seen the famously mysterious trees from high above in planes flying over Witch territory. Any attempt to grow or transfer the eternally-red maple trees outside northern Witch lands causes both the tree and every planted thing within a 10 foot radius to wither and die.

Her daemon is a small bird with dark, iridescent purple plumage and an orange belly - a Hildebrandt's starling. He sits perched on the top of her head, watching Will with bright red eyes. He leans down and whispers something in the girl's ear. She blinks at Will and then scurries off, her dark, braided hair bobbing behind her.

He knows that the jig is up. Sighing, he turns back to the bookcase and looks down to the book in his hands. There's a symbol in the title that he hadn't noticed; it matches the rune design on Jesse's sheets.

The moment he slides the book back into place, he hears the voice that had so effectively dressed Brian Zeller down. “You're Witch-blooded, aren't you?”

Will turns around again. The girl peers at him suspiciously from around the door frame. Beside her is an older woman. If she were human, Will would think she was a very physically fit late 40s or early 50s. Like the girl, she carries her own bough of blood-drop maple. Her skin is medium tan, and her long, wavy copper hair has streaks of silver throughout. But her most striking feature is her eyes: they're bright emerald and glimmering with wisdom acquired from hundreds of years of life. Beverly Katz is right; the Witch Calanthia is certainly striking to behold.

He sees no daemon near her, but for a full-grown and settled Witch, that doesn't mean anything. Will quickly glimpses out Jesse's window into the family's garden, wondering if her daemon is out there observing him unseen or hundreds of miles away back in her clan's territory.

“Well?” Calanthia prompts.

“How do you know?” Will asks, realizing it's a stupid question as soon as it's spoken.

Calanthia laughs. She turns to the girl beside her. “Clarice, go mind the agents. I want to speak with this one alone.”

Clarice bows to her mistress and shoots Will another look before departing.

Calanthia steps into Jesse's room and Will finds himself taking a step backward. The Witch tilts her head at his skittishness but does not look offended by it.

“I've been around a long, long time, boy,” she says. “I've seen countless sons be born, grow old, and die. Though none of my clanmates ever had an Omega. It's incredibly rare for our kind.”

Will stares at her, trying to deduce her intentions. But he knows there's no point in denying it or in trying to deflect. “My mother,” he says warily. “Atchafalaya River clan.”

Calanthia gives a low, disapproving hum. “They're a difficult, territorial bunch. Not very friendly to outsiders, other clans included. Very conservative and traditional,” she says. She narrows her vibrant green eyes slightly, her brows rising knowingly. “Some very strong beliefs about Omegas.”

Will cups his hands over Sabine and glares at the Witch, feeling like a rat cornered by a cat.

She laughs. “Don't worry. Few clans are as superstitious as your kin. The clans may share the same stars, but the signs and symbols we attribute to them can be wildly different. I do not think less of you for something you can't control,” she says. Her lips turn up into a soft smile, and her eyes glimmer with bittersweet nostalgia. “The son I bore two hundred years ago taught me that lesson.”

The idea of outliving one's child not just by years or decades but by centuries makes something deep in Will's bones ache with empathy for the Witch before him. Knowing that it's a biological fact that a Witch will long outlive her male offspring might not necessarily prepare her emotionally for the inevitable. Maybe that's why his own mother abandoned him. But he can't afford to think about that mess now.

“I'm sorry you had to go through that,” Will says, still on guard. “I know your culture is used to it, but it still must be difficult to know your son will have such a short life compared to your own.”

Calanthia gives him a small, wistful smile and for the first time since she entered the room Will feels as if he is no longer being appraised as an oddity.

“The arrow is authentic,” Calanthia says. It takes Will a moment to remember the very reason the Witch has come. “Probably a courting gift given from a Witch to her intended some time ago.”

“Do you think it could be traced to anyone specific?”

Calanthia shakes her head. “There was no special carving or other personalization to it. It's just an ordinary arrow we would use for hunting or battle. Whoever the Witch originally gave it to, she probably wasn't very serious about them,” she says. “There are probably hundreds of arrows exactly like that in your antique shops across the world. As Witch items go, it's far and away the easiest for humans to procure. Far and away the thing we protect the least.”

It would have made his job so much easier if the arrows were easier to track. Will frowns and bites his lip in thought. The arrow. The feast laid out for someone being welcomed home. Jesse's room, full of merchandise for a fictionalized and fantastical tale involving Witches.

Some of the puzzle pieces slide into place with a sickening lurch that hits Will right in his gut. Jesse killed his own family, most likely inspired in some way by his favorite book series.

“Would a clan of Witches take in a human boy?” Will asks.

Calanthia cocks her head at the unexpected question. “Most Witch mothers want to see their young sons as they grow. But it's an instinct that fades over time. Most human men born to Witches seem uncomfortable meeting their mothers once they look older than she does,” she says. “There are open-minded clans that allow a child who was declared male at birth to live as a Witch among them if her daemon has settled as a bird and she feels powerfully drawn to her clan. But her mother would have to be a clan Witch. A clan would not take in a child born to two human parents unless it was on a temporary, emergency basis.”

“I think the Turners were killed by their own son,” Will says. “And I think Jesse had some kind of help or guidance. A twelve year old boy is not going to have access to or knowledge of a poison that could kill his family like that.”

“And you think he was assisted by a Witch?”

“Not necessarily a real Witch. But someone who could appeal to Jesse's fantasies of a magical, important life to draw him in.”

Calanthia frowns, considering Will's theory. “You said the boy is twelve?”

Will nods.

“Good,” Calanthia says, sighing. She holds out her right arm. Before Will can ask what she's doing, he hears the barely-perceptible fluttering sound of wings from down the hall and a beautiful snowy owl flies into Jesse's room. He alights on to Calanthia's arm.

“My daemon, Ambrosios,” Calanthia says. “Our Tethers are not boundless at birth. Right now, Clarice's is no longer than yours. But Witches have a rite of passage. A successful rite grants us the ability to travel far apart from our daemons.”

“What does that have to do with Jesse's age?” Will asks.

“If he were close to his 18th birthday, to settling, then whoever is indulging his incorrect fantasies about Witches may try to improvise the Tether-lengthening rite,” Calanthia says ominously. “Only a human with a truly terrifying amount of dedication, focus, and fortitude can endure it. Most die horrifically.”

Will shudders, imagining what a botched attempt could do. Imagining the pull of the Tether between himself and Sabine, drawn so tight that he can feel threads of it snapping between them like tearing tendons. One by one, tighter and tighter, until there's only the thinnest filament keeping him connected to his very soul. Until this, too, snaps.

He shuts his eyes tight and tries to clear the image away.

“There's one more thing for you to keep in mind, boy,” Calanthia says.

Will opens his eyes and readies himself for the Witch's advice.

“If Jesse and his guide are inspired by Witches, they will either already have more members of their group or they will be looking for more,” she warns. “There is no such thing as a clan of two.”

A Game

Chapter Notes

> Next chapter time! For those who read the previous chapter's notes, you may recall that this was going to be called "A Convocation". Well, that was before the chapter kept getting longer and longer until I finally had to snap it in half. So instead of this time, NEXT chapter will be "A Convocation".
>
> You can read some of my notes on the previous chapter by visiting my dreamwidth, and if you want to follow my (slowly) increasingly frequent updates/tomfoolery, you can hit up my Twitter.
>
> Thank you for your patience as I slowly crank out this thing. You guys are the best. Without further ado, here we go!

Outside of some of the lecture halls in his time as a university and postgraduate student and a few stray trips to older theaters for live shows, Will has never been in a room as large and luxurious as Lecter's office. It's certainly more sumptuous than other medical offices he has been in, most often encountered featuring beige walls, popcorn ceilings, and fluorescent lights that always have one indecisive bulb trying to choose if it wants to burn out or not.

Will feels Hannibal's eyes on his back as he moves further into the office. Unlike all other office visits Will has endured, Hannibal does not instruct him on where to sit or what to do. If Will is going to be forced into therapy, then he has all the right in the world to run out the clock as best he can.

He wanders past the chaise lounge and stops in front of one of two incredibly tall, narrow windows. Although most of the window is hidden behind a cream-colored cloth blind, there is just enough space at the bottom for Will to peer out and see the fine brickwork of the neighboring building. Not fully knowing why, he reaches out and rubs the fabric of the widow's red and grey drapes between his thumb and forefinger. It has a better thread count than his sheets.

Where the hell do you even get two-story drapes? Sabine mutters. *Pier 100 Imports?*

The terrible joke startles a small laugh out of Will, at which point he realizes he is not only groping a stranger's drapes but also laughing creepily to himself. His hand recoils as if burned, and he flexes it awkwardly at his side.

“This is ridiculous,” he says.

“What is?” Hannibal asks.

“Me, being here, in a place like this,” Will says, raising his hands and gesturing around the room. “If the FBI weren't footing the bill, I'd never be able to afford therapy here.”

“I've been working under the assumption that if you were the one paying, you wouldn't seek therapy anywhere.”

Will laughs bitterly. “True. I wouldn't. But especially not in an office where the decor probably costs more than my whole mortgage.”

He hears the soft shuffling sound of fabric as Hannibal sits behind him. “Is money a concern for you, Will?”

“No,” Will says, thinking of his little house in the middle or nowhere, of his dogs he can feed and keep healthy. A modest life, devoid of ostentatious luxury, but comfortable. “It's near the bottom of my long list of concerns.”

“But that was not always the case.”

Will shakes his head. “Not really, at least for me,” he says. “I didn't mind growing up poor. My dad worried about it since he was the sole provider for us, especially since I was still pretty little while the Reagan administration started walking back some of the welfare resources for people with daemons like my dad's.”

“You mentioned in Minnesota that your father had an irregular daemon. Was that why he benefited from the Americans with Disadvantageous Daemons Act before it was gutted?”

“Partly. Unusually large hellbender - a type of North American salamander, in case you're not familiar. But they can't spend too long out of the water. He had an aquarium she could just barely fit in, but that just made for more logistical problems.”

“Your quiet, poor, irregular father certainly helped shape you to be the man you are today, but we are all a product of multiple influences. Several hands carving at our marble. Many cooks adding spices to our broth. How did your mother impact you, Will?”

“My mother-” Will begins, but he cuts himself off. It's then that he realizes he has fallen in another trap.

Will finally turns to face Hannibal, who is jotting down a few notes. He strides over to the chair opposite Hannibal's own, but he does not sit. Instead, he stands behind it and grips the back with his right hand. The upholstery is plush against his palm.

“You've done it again,” he says.

Hannibal looks up at him, a faux-innocent expression on his face. It makes Will's skin tingle irritably, similar to the feeling of getting lightly slapped while inflicted with a healing sunburn.

“And what would that be?” Hannibal asks.

“Got me talking to you through trickery,” Will says. “Last time, in the hotel room, you did it by offering me the illusion of control. This time you pretend to give me free rein by not immediately setting expectations and procedures.”

“It sounds like you've had to endure some rather poor experiences with other mental health professionals,” Hannibal muses, reaching forward to preen some of the feathers at the top of Aušrinė's head. “It's true that there is something I'd like for you to focus on in our conversations. A goal. But leading with that wouldn't work for you. You'd dig your heels in and refuse to cooperate.”

“What makes you think I won't just do that now?”

“We're still talking, aren't we?”

Will narrows his eyes.“I'll answer your questions. Truthfully. But only if you ask them honestly and straight-forwardly. You try to weasel information out of me, or goad me into anything with mind games, and I'll lie to your face. Deal?”

Hannibal looks positively delighted. “Deal.”

Maybe he had been expecting more of a fight. Or the very least, some sociological haggling so it wouldn't look like Will is getting everything completely his own way without any concessions. But then, Will thinks, maybe Hannibal can intuit that answering personal questions is a concession in and of itself. In any case, Will feels some of his righteous anger draining out of him, leaving him feeling slightly deflated and awkward.

“Well, what is it?” he mutters, looking away from Hannibal. “This goal of yours.”

“I want you to work towards keeping Sabine out in the open.”

Will feels Sabine freeze, both mentally and physically. He feels it, too. The prickling of a skin at the crown of his head and the tingle of the nerves down his spine. Sweat beads at his temple, and he reaches up to brush it away with a frustrated flick of his hand through his curls.

The expression on Will's face must be absolutely poisonous, because Hannibal holds his hands up in a placating gesture immediately. “That doesn't mean it has to happen today, and it doesn't mean that you have to keep her out when we are not in session,” he says. He lowers his hands, folding them primly in his lap. “But the purpose of therapy is to work through the challenges in your life, not hide away from them.”

“Hiding has worked pretty well for me so far,” Will retorts. “It's an effective survival strategy.”

“I don't want you to survive, Will. I want you to thrive.”

Will opens his mouth to argue, but he is interrupted by something he does not expect. The chill that had swept through Sabine thaws abruptly, replaced by a burning irritation. He feels her move, clawing her way up out of his pocket.

What are you doing? he asks frantically. *You're just going to let him have his way?*

Sabine does not respond to him. She simply crawls out of the pocket and moves to sit on Will's shoulder. Her coloration changes as she goes, turning from the dark blue of Will's shirt, to a sickly lavender, to a ghostly white with angry red splotches. She looks like bloodstains against a white wall, and Will doesn't need to be looking at Hannibal and Aušrinė to know that the raven daemon must be looking at this display with keen interest.

“It's good to see you again,” Aušrinė says kindly to Sabine.

“This is just because we owe you for watching the dogs while we were out of state at the Turner crime scene,” Sabine says irritably. “Don't get used to it.”

Aušrinė chuckles. “We'll see. You may find it invigorating to explore life out in the open.”

Sabine does not bother responding. Instead, she clenches her pincer-like feet into the fabric of Will's shirt and glares at Hannibal and Aušrinė.

“It was no trouble to feed your dogs,” Hannibal says, turning his attention to Will. “I'll admit, when you told me you had seven of them, I thought it would be rather chaotic. But they were all quite well-behaved. You must have a way with animals.”

Still unsettled by Sabine's bold behavior, it takes Will a moment to process what Hannibal said. “Oh, uh… hm. I understand them, that's all. Dogs are simple. Unburdened and uncomplicated. When you know what they want, you can easily provide it. When you know what a person wants… sometimes it makes your skin crawl.”

“Have you always preferred the company of animals to people?”

“Long as I can remember,” Will says.

“Did you have pets growing up?”

“No. Moved around too much. Plus, it would have been a third mouth to feed for my dad,” Will says.

He pauses for a moment, briefly taken back to any number of hot, humid nights of his boyhood. Bare feet buried in the cool riverbank mud, listening to the yelps of feral dogs or coyotes in the distance. Possibly both. Sabine at his side, tail wagging slowly and ears perked up. Looking over his shoulder to the house boat to see if his dad is watching. The light crunching of twigs under his feet as he wanders into the nearby thicket.

When he returns to the present, he is sitting in the chair opposite Hannibal. He frowns, wondering how long he was lost in thought. Probably not too long, given there is only curiosity and patience in Hannibal's expression.

“The houseboat would usually be anchored in the middle of nowhere outside whatever town we washed up in as we moved along the rivers. The places where the lost and forgotten end up. If there were strays, I'd sneak out and feed them scraps sometimes,” Will says.

“Did your mother not contribute to the family finances?”

The soft, bittersweet nostalgia that had begun to glow in Will's chest is immediately snuffed out. Lecter is certainly persistent.

“She wasn't around,” he grumbles.

Hannibal takes some more notes, and Will distrusts the scribbling of his elegant pen immensely. “I'm sorry, Will, but I do need further elaboration on that,” he says. “Did she-”

“What do you know about Witches?” Will interrupts.

There's a brief flash of surprise in Hannibal's eyes before the expression levels out into something knowing and satisfied, as if he had just witnessed a stubborn puzzle piece sliding into place. “I don't know very much about the North American clans,” he says. “But there was a clan not far from my childhood home in Lithuania, and I'm very familiar with a certain northern Japanese clan. The Lake Toya clan. My aunt left them to marry my uncle and live in Europe.”

Will furrows his brow in confusion. “Witches just have children with humans,” he murmurs. “They don't get married. And they *definitely* don't permanently move so far away from their clan lands.”

“She was a very unorthodox Witch, admittedly,” Hannibal replies. “I think the two of you could have had a very interesting conversation about what it is like to reject and be rejected by your kind.”

“They aren't my kind,” Will growls. “My mother rejected me for being a boy, and then her clan hated me for presenting as an Omega.”

“But that isn't true for every clan,” Hannibal says, his voice damnably calm. “The Lake Metelys clan Witches counted an Omega amongst their number. I saw him a few times in my early childhood. The townsfolk would whisper that he was over 100 years old but barely looked 70. That he had a small glimmer of magic inherited from his mother. Apparently the Lake Metelys clan considered something as rare as an Omega birth to one of their own a sign of good fortune, not a curse.”

Hannibal tilts his head in thought. “If it's true that Omegas inherit a fraction of their mothers’ power, then perhaps that would explain some of your more unusual traits.”

Will's heart skips a beat, and he can feel the blotchy red draining out of Sabine. Out of the corner of his eye, she is as pale as a bleached skeleton in a desert. Her dismay at being out in the open with her thoughts on display, flashed across her skin like the swirling colors of a mood ring, stings through their Tether.

“What do you mean?” Will asks, praying that his words come out measured.

“Your perception and empathy are well beyond that of a typical person's ability,” Hannibal says.

Now that he has actually put it into words, Will finds the idea absurd. He laughs, relief slowly bubbling up in him. “What I do isn't magic,” he chuckles, shaking his head. “It's just connections. Anyone could make them if they knew where and how to look. The clues just have to be there. Anything that requires data can't be magic.”

“First of all, I think you undersell your abilities. Second, the Witches certainly seem to know what they're doing when they perform magic. They perform all of the steps and procedures. Isn't that data? When they attain replicable results with their actions, isn't that science? Perhaps the two things are more closely linked than you might think.”

Will genuinely doesn't know how to respond to that. It still feels absurd to entertain such thoughts in a medical professional's office. He takes another look around, wondering if perhaps he has somehow missed some tell-tale new age crystals or other signs of quackery hanging around amongst the room's fineries.

Hannibal smiles. “I apologize, Will. I do enjoy spirited debates, and I admit sometimes I play the devil's advocate in order to indulge,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “My ultimate point is that there have been vanishingly few anthropological, physiological, or psychological studies on Witches since they can be rather… terrifyingly stubborn. Even fewer still on Omegas born to Witches, given their rarity. You may be the only one alive on Earth right now.”

“Yeah, well, if you think that means I'm going to volunteer to be poked and prodded in the name of your curiosity, you're sorely mistaken,” Will mutters. He sighs. “This is why I try not to let people know about… about all of that.”

“How many people know the truth about your parentage?”

“Not many,” Will says. “My dad is dead, and my mother would probably never admit to having me. If it's in my background check file at the FBI. Jack might know, but he hasn't said anything so who knows. You. And the Witch who consulted at the Turner crime scene saw through me immediately.”

Although clearly interested in every word tumbling from Will's mouth, the reference to a Witch at the Turner residence clearly piques Hannibal's interest. “Why was a Witch brought in to consult?”

Oh, thank God, Sabine sighs. *Work. Keep him there.*

“What do you know about the case?” Will asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. “Not much, I'm afraid. The news so far has only reported it as the tragedy of a family murdered after their son went missing a year ago. Speculation that whoever kidnapped Jesse came back with blood on their mind.”

“There was evidence that the killers were trying to imitate Witch behavior, but not in a way that fully understands them,” Will says. He imagines the countless pictures of Jesse Turner in his home, beloved in his absence, vanished for a year, only to come back and kill the family

who pined for him. His mouth twists in bitterness. “Childish. Cultural pantomime. Jack called in a Witch from a clan in West Virginia to weigh in on it.”

“And you think that the missing boy was a willing participant in the murder of his own family?”

Will smiles ruefully. “Am I that obvious?”

“It's in the glint of your eyes. The scowl on your lips.”

Will lets out a long, slow breath through his nose. “I'm sure of it.”

“I trust your insight and instincts,” Hannibal says. “But if Jesse killed his family, there are certain facts about the matter that may render his culpability murky at best. Adolescence is our species’ first true brush with the uncomfortable liminal spaces that life entails. Not a child anymore, but also lacking in life experience, logical reasoning skills, and the full understanding of consequences that adulthood entails.”

“I know, I know,” Will sighs. “And I know that happy families all have their dysfunctional little secrets. That all the neighbors on the news shaking their heads over the fact that a perfect family was killed don’t know the full story. But I was there, in that house, and I didn't see anything that would merit a child killing his entire family.”

His mind slips through time and space again, taking him back to a day in his mid-20s when he was working as a beat cop in New Orleans, trying to scrape together enough cash to move and go back to graduate school. Blistering hot afternoon in the dog days of summer, sweat plastering his uniform to his back. Sabine roasting in the uniform pocket but too sheepish to dare come out in the open.

He's in a tiny, ramshackle house in a poor neighborhood. Far too many people in the precinct call it a bad neighborhood, or things far worse that he would never dare repeat. But he knows that most of the people who live there are just doing their best, working hard against an unfair hand that an uncaring society has dealt to them. It's the rich neighborhoods he doesn't trust. The ones who have the luxury to become bored and the time, money, and connections to put that boredom to foul use.

He and his partner - an even younger speck of a kid who is fresh out of the academy - have been called here on a drunk and disorderly complaint from the woman next door. Two inhabitants: an Alpha father with a cougar daemon and an eight year old boy. According to the neighbor, the father has been in a spiral since the death of his Omega mate in a hit-and-run accident several months before.

Will's partner and his sheepdog daemon have corralled the Alpha in the cramped kitchen while Will is stuck with the boy in the living room. It's not that Will dislikes kids; he's actually not too bad at handling them. He does resent that, as one of the few Omegas in his precinct, he is expected to be the one to deal with them. But he supposes it beats the other Omega-default alternative: shaving off his facial hair and pretending to be 14 in order to act as bait in pedophile sting operations.

The kid is scrawny and covered in more bruises than a normal child gets in their day-to-day roughhousing. Will can see right through to the root cause. Clumsy, drunken hands shoving, grabbing, hitting. Will doesn't realize he's grinding his teeth until he hears the sound in the back of his head.

But despite the obvious signs of neglect and abuse, the kid is wailing about how he doesn't want his dad to go to prison. Huge, wrecking sobs shake his little body as he sobs into the soft fur of his trembling rabbit daemon. The boy should hate his father for this. Will would understand that. But in spite of it all, the boy loves the brute.

Before Will can try to comfort the kid, he hears a loud shout from the kitchen, and he feels the tearing anguish of a knife shoved into the meat of his shoulder.

When the past recedes and the present comes roaring back to him, Will grasps at the throbbing phantom pain in his shoulder. A fine sheen of sweat has collected across his brow, and he finds himself accidentally staring into Hannibal's concerned eyes. The psychiatrist is half out of his seat with Aušrinė fluttering out of the way before Will can even blink.

“Too much… I can't…” Sabine croaks before darting to hide away in Will's shirt pocket.

“Will?” Hannibal asks as he kneels beside him. “Are you having chest pains?”

“No, uh,” Will says, shaking his head. His muscles tense when he feels Hannibal take his right arm and press his fingers against his wrist, feeling for his pulse. “What are you doing?”

“I was afraid you were having a cardiac episode,” Hannibal says. His fingers press into Will's wrist a little longer than necessary. “Slightly elevated, but strong. Good.”

Will yanks his arm back and rubs at the lingering warmth of a foreign touch tingling on his wrist. “Would you have even been able to do anything if I *was* having a heart attack?” he grumbles.

“Before I came to practice psychiatry, I was a trauma surgeon,” Hannibal answers, still kneeling by Will's side. “I'd provide care to the best of my ability.”

“Well, good to know I have a one-stop shop if my brain and body both break down,” Will says sourly.

Hannibal finally stands back up, though he does not move back to his chair. “What was that, Will?”

Will sighs. “I was just… a thousand miles away. Thinking about the past.”

“Are these moments of recollection always that strong?”

“Vivid imagination,” Will says. “Blessing and a curse. Curse mostly.”

“Something must have triggered the memory.”

“I don't have PTSD,” Will says, glaring at Hannibal out of the corner of his eyes.

“I didn't suggest that you do,” Hannibal replies smoothly. “But if you're trying to convince me that there is nothing pathological in your flashback, then telling me that it appeared to you with no provocation whatsoever isn't the best way to accomplish that.”

Will scowls at the words, but he can't deny their point. “I mentioned that when I was in the Turner house, I didn't see any sign that the family deserved to die,” he says. He furrows his brow, concentrating on the words that are itching at the back of his throat. “I have seen things that… I have seen situations where it would make sense…”

“You have seen circumstances where it would be not only reasonable but just for a child to kill their family,” Hannibal suggests.

“Yes,” Will whispers, the sound little more than a rushed exhalation. He risks a look up to Hannibal's eyes and relaxes when he sees no judgement there. “Yes.”

“Like Abigail Hobbs.”

Will sighs and runs his hand across his suddenly tired face. “In retrospect,” he says. “But if Abigail knew what her father was doing while he was doing it… I suppose it doesn't matter until she wakes up and we can speak with her.”

“One thing at a time, Will,” Hannibal says. He reaches down, offering a hand up.

Even though Will thinks he is perfectly healthy and doesn't need a literal helping hand to get out of a chair, he finds himself not immediately dismissing the gesture. He looks down at the palm of Hannibal's hand; for someone so fancy and cultured, it's surprisingly strong and calloused. Almost as much as Will's own, rough from fixing motors, fishing, and other outdoorsy hobbies. Will supposes Hannibal must have physically demanding hobbies of his own.

He takes the offered hand and stands. As they touch, the clock in the office chimes. The hour is over, the time seeming to have blown past Will without him noticing.

“I'd like to see you at least once a week to continue these anchoring conversations. Does this time slot work for you on a continuing basis?” Hannibal asks as he walks with Will toward the door, Aušrinė hopping merrily behind them. When Will nods, he continues, “Excellent. I'd like to also give you my personal number in case you need to reach out to me between visits.”

Will squints at him. “I know that most psychiatrists have an emergency line for their patients to use if they're in a crisis,” he says. “But it's never their personal number. Very unusual choice.”

“And none of my other clients are out in the field hunting murderers for the FBI,” Hannibal replies. He smiles good-naturedly as he opens the door for Will. “Very unusual career.”

Aušrinė flutters up to perch on the bust of Athena over the door. “Good night, Sabine,” she says. “Thank you for the work you put in this evening. I appreciate your willingness to challenge your instincts.”

Will feels Sabine move against his chest, and he looks down to see a single pincer-like hand reach up to grip at the lip of her pocket. She is still bone white.

“Like I said,” she croaks. “Don't get used to it.”

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Will tries to stifle a yawn as he enters the morgue. There are bodies laid out on four of the tables, each one covered by white sheets to preserve their dignity. Will's stomach churns at seeing the two smaller shapes, and he turns away from the grim sight.

On the other side of the room, Beverly and Zeller are quietly conversing by one of the empty beds. Their daemons stand near by, whispering to each other as well. For a quick moment, Will wonders if they're gossiping about him, but he immediately dismisses the thought as paranoid.

When Beverly notices him, she grins and gives a little wave, beckoning him over. Zeller looks less than pleased for the intrusion.

“Where's Price?” Will asks, his voice scratchy. He clears his throat. “Jack told us to be here at 6.”

“Collecting a report, I think,” Beverly says. Up close, Will can see that both she and Zeller have slight bags under their eyes. “Long night for you too?”

“Uh, yeah. I realized it was probably going to be relevant, so I was up late downloading and skimming the Gallagher Dare books.”

Zeller bursts into laughter. “Great, just typical,” he says. “I'm up past three doing autopsies on kids, and you get to kick back under your sheets with a flashlight reading children's books.”

“You're on forensics, not profiling,” Beverly retorts, crossing her arms in front of her. “If Jesse did it, we'll need to know why.”

“The ‘why' doesn't feel so important when you're up to the wrists in the siblings he murdered,” Zeller mutters. After a moment, he adds, “And we're all profiling in our own ways and have been doing so since before Graham showed up. It's not like he invented it.”

Before the argument can either escalate or resolve, Jimmy Price bursts through the door looking far too awake and energetic given the circumstances.

“Am I good, or am I good?” he asks proudly as he hurries toward his companions and drops a report on the empty morgue table before them with a flourish. “Boom. Water hemlock poisoning.”

“We’re all very proud of you,” Zeller says sarcastically.

“In every glass?” Will asks, picking up the report and flipping through it.

“Ah, that's the interesting part. Turns out the water hemlock was in the glasses that the dead family members used, but the one at the head of the table had cow parsley in it. Looks pretty similar to its poisonous cousin, but it's harmless. The worst thing to happen to whoever drank it would be a mouthful of bitter Kool Aid.”

“It's sleight of hand,” Will says. He sets the report down. “Whoever prepared the drinks wanted Jesse to think he was drinking the same poison as his family, but that he was unaffected by it.”

Beverly squints in confusion. “Why would somebody want a 12 year old to think he was drinking poison?”

“Uh… that's a major plot point in the book series that we found in Jesse's room,” Will says. He can see Zeller rolling his eyes in his peripheral vision. “There's a scene in the first book where the main character's stepmother tries to poison him with belladonna, but he's immune because Witches can't be poisoned by anything that grows naturally.”

“Is that a real thing?” Jimmy asks.

“Gotta be, right?” Beverly says, scratching her chin in thought. “I mean, they can *fly*. Being immune to some poisons is child's play next to that. Plus they all have some kind of special connection with certain plants on their land, like the blood-drop maple. ”

“And that is how you manufacture a lie,” Will says. “Or slightly more charitably: a fantasy. If you come up with something that sounds more plausible than something that is already known to be true, people will swallow it down whole.”

Jimmy and Minerva blink at him. “So it's *not* true,” he says, his voice unsure.

Will shakes his head. “Witches can be poisoned just the same as humans.”

“I guess this means whoever has Jesse isn't an actual Witch,” Beverly says. “Unless she's thinking so many steps ahead that she's trying to throw us off the trail.”

“Doubt it,” Zeller says. “His last confirmed sighting was some security camera footage of him getting in an RV at a rest area on the highway while carrying two stuffed duffle bags. Probably not too many Witches out there buying RVs.”

“The thing that confuses me about all this is that it's pretty clear Jesse ran off with whoever was in that RV, but how did they get in touch with each other?” Jimmy asks. “Everyone in his neighborhood and school was cleared in the initial investigation.”

There is a single heavy moment before Will, Beverly, and Zeller all answer in unison, “Internet.”

“If the initial investigation didn't mention anything suspicious in Jesse's email or search history, then he either wiped it before the police could get to it, or he was in contact with whoever took him through an account-based site. Probably the latter. If Jesse used an

anonymous email and lied about his age to make an account, he could be chatting with like-minded people in no time," Will says.

"So, what? Facebook, Instagram…?" Beverly asks.

"Worth looking into," Will says. "But given Jesse's interests, I think we should start with dedicated Gallagher Dare fan sites and forums."

"Yeah, but if he used an email that can't be easily traced to him, a fake age, fake name… not the best odds for finding him," Beverly says, shaking her head.

"It's not like it'll just be us!" Jimmy says hopefully. "I'm sure Jack will be able to siphon off some other agents to help, uh... investigate forums for a kids' book."

Zeller scoffs. "Yeah, sounds *real* important when you put it that way."

Will jolts when he hears the morgue doors open behind him. He turns to see Jack heading toward them, his hands full of a drink carrier filled with four large cups of coffee. Themis trots at his side, her head lolling slightly with exhaustion.

"My penance for bringing you all in for such a long day," he says. He begins to distribute the drinks, "Cream but no sugar for Brian, sugar but no cream for Beverly, and two extra espresso shots and ten pumps of caramel for Jimmy."

"God bless," Jimmy says as he accepts the abomination of a beverage.

"Will, I didn't know how you take your coffee, so it's as-is. We've got sugar and creamer in the break room if you need it."

"Black's fine," Will says, taking a sip. It's a pretty good roast, but he gets a sudden, unbidden mental image of Hannibal turning his nose up at it and going out of his way to prepare 'real' coffee for Will.

"We've been doing some brainstorming," Beverly says. "Pretty sure we're looking for someone who met Jesse over the internet."

"Someones," Jack corrects irritably. "Footprint analysis able to pull five separate prints in the mud on the lawn. None of the treads matched any of the shoes in the Turner house. Three in juvenile sizes, one women's size 7 and one men's size 8."

"Two adults and three kids?" Jimmy asks.

"Not necessarily," Jack replies. "I was wearing men's size 9 when I was 11. Could be an adult woman, three younger teens, and one kid in his mid-to-late teens."

"Either way, a family," Will says grimly. "A lost and found family."

*****

Later that day, at around noon, Will is mid-way through a lecture on the discovery and death of Garret Jacob Hobbs. He feels particularly on edge, partly from the lack of sleep, partly the crash of caffeine from the large amount of coffee consumed over the early morning meeting, but mostly because his students applauded when he began his lecture. It's distasteful, he thinks. Crass. Makes him remember the sting of Dust passing through him while Hobbs stares at him, wide-eyed and gasping.

It makes his skin crawl, even now.

He spots two figures at the door while he is showing pictures of Hobbs' corpse splayed out in the kitchen. It's Jack and Themis, and immediately Will knows his class will need to be cut short. As if to drive the point home, Jack gives a gesture that Will interprets as "wrap it up".

"And it looks like something has come up," Will tells the class as he flicks the overhead projection off. There is a confused murmur from the students before a few of them notice Jack and the whispers turn to excited speculation. Many of them flash Jack with eager grins as they file past him. Robert Jeffries, possibly still skittish from the last time he was alone with Jack and Will, nearly bolts to get out of the lecture room soon as possible.

Once the last lingering student is gone, Jack raises a brow at Will. "Ready for a field trip?"

"Oh, God," Will groans as he gathers his notes. "What now?"

"We got a bite from one of the moderators of the most popular Gallagher Dare forum online."

"Already?" Will asks, genuinely surprised. It then occurs to him where the books were originally published. "Please tell me we don't have to fly to England for this."

"Just an hour up north to Georgetown University. The informant, Alex Hernandez, is a freshman there."

"Isn't it more normal procedure to have them come here for an interview? A *scheduled* interview?"

"Seeing a family annihilated by their own preteen son doesn't exactly make me want to leisurely page through my calendar and make appointments for three weeks from now," Jack says. He splays his hands out wide. "I've got someone willing to talk as long as I can meet them before their 5:30 chemistry lab. I'm not about to look that gift horse in the mouth."

There's a glint of something in Jack's eyes, and its presence makes Sabine chuckle darkly across the Tether. *Wonder if that's the same look that got Miriam Lass on missing persons lists.*

Sabine! Will sends back, hoping that the internal squabble isn't showing on his face. *That's horrible!*

You're right, Sabine replies churlishly. *I'm sure whatever happened to her IS horrible.*

Will puts up a wall in their Tether. It's nothing that would actually prevent Sabine from talking to him; they are one and the same, after all. The same entity in two bodies, just the

same as everyone else in the world. It's more symbolic than anything else. He may feel a bit ridiculous putting his own soul in time out, but they're so tired and stressed that the silence still feels a little welcome.

The drive up to D.C. is largely uneventful. Jack thankfully avoids small talk, other than occasional outbursts targeted at the subpar driving skills of other travellers. Will stares out the passenger side window to the scenery as it rushes by, trying to ignore the distinct feeling that Themis is observing him carefully from the back seat.

Upon arriving at Georgetown's campus, Jack guides Will to the agreed upon meeting spot, a small reserved group study room in Lauinger Library. Alex Hernandez, a short and thin Beta with dyed teal hair fashioned into a curly faux-hawk, is already there surrounded by several stacks of books. Their black-necked swan daemon roosts comfortably on a chair beside them.

They have a planner journal open to the current month, and Will can see it marked up with paper deadlines, test dates, social plans, and - written on the coming Friday in a variety of bright gel pen colors - the words “BDAY!! THE BIG 1-9!”

“Excuse me. Are you Alex Hernandez?” Jack asks, causing the student to look up from the book. When they nod, Jack waves Will to follow him into the study room. “I’m Special Agent Jack Crawford and my associate Will Graham. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us on such short notice.”

“No problem,” Alex says, gesturing for Jack and Will to sit opposite them. “When I saw the talk in the mod chat that the FBI wanted to talk to us about something, I knew right away it had to have been WitchWay and her group.”

“WitchWay?” Jack asks.

“A regular in the RP board,” Alex says. When they see the confusion in Jack's eyes, they continue, “Role-playing. For making up collaborative stories set in the Gallagher Dare world using either the existing characters or original ones you've made up. When it's just a fun game, it's great. But WitchWay took it way too seriously and ruled that part of the site with an iron fist. When she and her core group vanished off the site a year ago, I knew something had to be up ”

“Was she one of the other moderators?” Will asks.

Alex scoffs. “Not for lack of trying. She probably put in applications for it a good two dozen times. But luckily all of us in the mod team saw through her cult of personality. She would have used the power to bully and brainwash others even more than she already was.”

Jack pulls a notepad out of his pants pocket and scrawls down some notes. “It's clear that this WitchWay person was really influential on the site. How many people would you say were involved in her group?”

Alex frowns and rolls their dark brown eyes up in thought. “Hmm… four? Yeah, four of WitchWay's favorites. There were maybe a dozen other users who wanted to be on the good side of someone who was so prominent in the fandom, but that was the core.”

Will and Jack exchange a look, both remembering the number of unfamiliar footprints left at the Turner house.

“Do you know any details about WitchWay?” Will asks.

“I know she's a woman. Don't know her real name or age, but I'd guess she's on the older side given that she only wanted the people caught in her orbit to call her ‘Mom’,” Alex says, frowning in concern. “That was the creepiest part. Like it's one thing to jokingly call an older friend that, but when you're an adult purposefully cultivating an online pseudo-family with kids, it's… like, it's *weird*.”

Will can imagine it now. Jesse coming home from school, frustrated by both his peers and parents due to the terrible funhouse mirror that is early puberty warping his perceptions. If he blends into the background at school, it's because everyone hates him and is purposefully excluding him. If his parents don't understand his interests, it's because they don't love him as much as his siblings. But online, there's someone who does listen to him, who does care. And the more he calls her ‘mom’, the more true it feels to him. Until, eventually, he leaves to join his ‘real’ family. Until his old family are malevolent fakes who must be eliminated.

And in the new family, just as it was in the Turner household, he isn't an only child.

If he was ever skeptical about how useful Alex's information would be, that skepticism is completely gone. This is who they're looking for, and he's sure of it. Now they just have to identify her beyond her username.

“What do you know about the users who made up WitchWay's core group?” Jack asks.

“For most of them, I only know their usernames,” Alex says. They pause for a moment and shift in their seat, clearly uncomfortable with the thought running through their head. “Except C.J. We used to be friends.”

Jackpot, Sabine thinks, her earlier irritability erased thanks to the promise of progress in the case.

“Tell us about C.J.,” Will urges.

“His username is l0stb0y - all one word, zeroes instead of Os,” Alex says. They reach out to stroke their daemon's long neck, a grasp for comfort in an uncomfortable situation. “We used to talk everyday, and not just on the forum. We traded numbers so we could text. We were really close for like three years, and since he was exactly one year younger than me, we traded a lot of advice on surviving high school. He was a great artist, and he used to mostly post in the fan art threads. But then WitchWay contacted him to request art for her RPs. This was before she really went all-in on her whole culty family thing. C.J. was her first convert. He slowly started talking to me less and less, until one day I tried to warn him that WitchWay was alienating him from people who cared about him and he blocked me on everything.”

Alex looks up and Will sees tears brimming in their eyes. “I just want C.J. to be okay. I know you probably can't share any details about what's going on, but I've been worried sick about him since he cut off contact with me over a year ago.”

”At this time, I can tell you that there's no sign that C.J. is hurt. We're doing all we can to find him, okay?” Jack says. His voice is warm and paternal, a quality Will is not used to hearing from someone who can be as intimidating and no-nonsense as Jack. Still, Will hopes Alex can draw some comfort from it.

Alex nods, sniffling a little and rubbing away a few stray tears. When they finish, there is determination shining in their eyes. “I still have C.J.’s number saved in my phone. Would it help if I give it to you?”

“It would,” Will says. “Thank you.”

A few hours later, on the drive back to Quantico, Will vaguely listens in as Jack makes call after call relaying information they had gleaned from Alex. The same scenery he had watched zip by in the early afternoon flies by once more, this time starting to cast long shadows against the dark oranges of the setting sun.

Will turns the conversation with Alex around in his head over and over, replaying it and trying to think about the information from multiple angles. But compared to the way Sabine is processing the same information, his thoughts feel idle and leisurely. Sabine worries Alex's words in her mind, practically gnawing on them the way his dogs might gnash on a soup bone in search of marrow.

Then, a little more than halfway through the drive, Sabine suddenly goes eerily still and silent. Will feels her percolating dread only moments before it explodes.

“Shit!” Sabine exclaims.

Will hears Themis startle in the backseat at the unexpected sound. “What is it?” the dog daemon asks, equal parts alarmed and irritated.

Sabine flashes the image of Alex Hernandez's calendar in Will's mind. The big 1-9. Then, she replays their words, *He was exactly one year younger than me.*

Will's blood freezes.

“You need to summon Calanthia as soon as you possibly can,” Will says, his voice sounding distant in his own head.

“What are you talking about, Will?”

Will swallows. “C.J. is turning 18 in four days,” he says, turning to stare wide-eyed at Jack. “WitchWay is going to try to lengthen his Tether when his daemon settles.”

Jack's nostrils flare and he takes in a deep, shuddering breath. He presses his foot down harder on the gas pedal, speeding all the way back to Quantico.

A Convocation

Chapter Notes

Oops, just missed my chapter-a-month goal! But this one is a real longboy, so I'm not too mad at myself for missing the goal.

As usual, last chapter's notes for those who are interested can be found here, and you can follow me on Twitter @rosenritter42 for updates on when to expect upcoming chapters, general bleating about the writing process, and occasionally pictures of fabulous robot figures.

The end of this chapter telegraphs what's coming next pretty strongly... but it's a trick! The next chapter will actually be one of two planned flashback chapters and probably won't be too long (she lies, like a liar). The first interlude, 生き甲斐 (Ikigai), will be up as soon as possible!

Thank you so much for following along. Comments are very much appreciated, and with no further ado, let's go!

Will winces and removes his glasses as a sharp pain flares at his temple. He hisses, rubbing at the sore spot for a moment. He reaches down into his pants pocket and removes a small bottle of over-the-counter painkillers. Removing the lid is more of a struggle than he expects, but he's exhausted and his head is throbbing. He can cut himself a little slack for having bad motor control.

He is sitting in the same chair where he stewed irritably while Jack, Alana, and Hannibal argued over what was best for him. That was only a few days ago, but it feels like a lifetime has passed in the interim.

Jack has been off in a special side-room attached to his office for the last five minutes. It's about the size of a broom closet and at first glance, it has all the visual style of one as well. But there's a certain faint strange energy that radiates out from it, almost like the heat haze that shines on highways in summer. Must be something inherent to the process of Jack contacting Calanthia, since Will doesn't remember having such an uneasy feeling the last time he was here.

He wonders if Jack can sense it at all. If any non-Witchborn person can sense it. He hopes so. He doesn't want to entertain the thought of any alternative.

The lid on his pills finally pops loose. With a sigh, Will shakes out two and swallows them down dry just as Jack and Themis leave the little room.

“It'll take her about an hour to fly here,” Jack says, sighing heavily as he eases down to sit at his desk. He frowns and rubs at his brow, looking as tired as Will feels.

“Ibuprofen?” Will asks, holding up the bottle and rattling the contents.

“No thanks,” Jack says, waving off the offer. “I don't think the cure for what ails me comes in a bottle.”

“You're telling me,” Will grumbles. “Long day. Do you mind if I nap while we're waiting for Calanthia to arrive?”

“Fine by me. But there is something I want to ask you first, Will.”

There's a weight to Jack's words that makes Will sit up a bit straighter. “Yeah?”

“How did you make the connection about C.J. settling soon?”

“Alex Hernandez said they were exactly one year older than C.J. Their calendar was open on the study desk, with Friday circled as their 19th birthday,” Will says. He shrugs, and with the amount of exhaustion he's currently working with, his shoulders ache with the movement. “Somebody would have put it together upon studying Alex's statement, or from vital statistics once we match C.J.’s phone number to a family plan and get a full name.”

“Somebody would have put it together *too late*, you mean,” Jack says. He rubs at his chin in quiet consideration for a moment. “I'm impressed, Will. You've given this case the greatest boon I can think of. More time.”

“Four days isn't much, Jack. Hell, it's closer to three days at this point. We might run ourselves ragged and still fail to beat the clock.”

“Better than nothing,” Jack replies. “There's a cushioned bench in the hall just outside. Go get some shut eye while we wait for Calanthia.”

“Don't have to tell me twice,” Will mutters as he stands, stretching his tired muscles. “What about you?”

Jack waves off the question with a flick of his hand. “I've got some delegating calls to make.”

As he walks out of Jack's office and toward the bench in the hall, Jack's talk about delegating jogs Will's memory. He's been out much longer than he had anticipated, and he hasn't made arrangements to feed the dogs.

“Shit,” he sighs, first sitting heavily on the bench and then settling down into a lying position. He makes sure Sabine is tucked away comfortably before pulling his phone from his pants pocket. He quickly taps out a text, allowing autocorrect to sweep up after him.

Stuck in Quantico longer than usual. Might not get home til 10. Hate to ask such short notice, but could you swing by my place & feed/let dogs out? Will owe you one.

He is just about to hit send when he realizes that the addressee for his text is Hannibal, not Alana. He stares at the screen for a moment longer before pressing backspace over and over to delete the message. He retypes the whole thing, double-checks the name at the top of the screen, and sends it to Alana.

He's fast asleep on the bench in less than five minutes.

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Will awakes to pressure on his shoulder and Jack's voice blaring into his skull like a ship's horn cuts through heavy fog.

“Wake up, Will. Calanthia's here.”

Will jerks up and awake, scrambling for his glasses. “‘m awake. What time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

“AM or PM?” Will asks. “Of what year?”

“The day hasn't been *that* long,” Jack says, laughing.

The blinking notification light on his phone catches Will's attention. “One sec,” he says, typing his password into his lock screen.

“Make it quick. Witches don't like to be kept waiting.”

There's a response to the text Will sent Alana. *Sure thing!* it reads. *You know I love visiting your dog army. :)*

Will smiles faintly and types a quick response, *They're more of a black-ops unit. If you have squirrels that need extrajudicial bothering, then they're your crew.*

“While you were asleep, we made some real progress,” Jack says as he gestures for Will to follow him. Themis lags a few steps behind, trailing Will as if he were a wayward sheep resisting herding. “One of the fingerprints Price found at the Turner scene came up with a match to a record in one of those anti-child abduction initiatives. Conner Frist of Huntsville, Alabama. Went missing 10 months ago. I called the local cops and they're heading out to tell the family that their boy's alive.”

“And an accomplice to a family annihilation,” Will mutters. “Maybe an active participant. Not exactly the heartwarming homecoming they probably hoped for.”

Jack sighs. “The other thing is that thanks to the phone number, we were able to confirm that C.J. is Charles James Lincoln of Bakersfield, California. Went missing over a year ago and his 18th birthday is this Friday. We don't have C.J.’s prints at the Turner crime scene, but it would be one hell of a coincidence if he's an unrelated missing person.”

“Have you already called Bakersfield like you did Huntsville?”

Jack shakes his head. “Just got the confirmation right before Calanthia showed up.”

“And anything on the adult or the fourth kid?”

“Nothing,” Jack says grimly as he stops in front of a door. He opens it, ushering Will through. Inside is a large conference meeting room. Will can tell right away that the room is used exclusively for non-confidential purposes, as one wall is taken up by a large window that looks out over a large quadrangle with short, tidy grass and a copse of trees. The night is extremely clear, with the moon hanging full and fat in the sky and countless stars glimmering around her. Normally the light pollution from DC makes even the cloudless nights feel hazy, but tonight the difference between the dark of the sky and the light of the celestial bodies is stark. The moonlight is bright enough that even though the electrical lights are off, Will can easily see.

Calanthia stands before the window with her back to the room. As he enters, Will takes in the expression on her face in three-quarter profile; her eyes are closed and her chin tilted up as she bathes in the moonlight. Her large branch of blood-drop maple leans against the wall by the window, and her owl daemon is nowhere in sight. Will keeps his eyes on her as he slinks to stand by the wall opposite the window, stopping in front of a large map of the United States.

Jack moves a finger toward the light switch. “Don't,” Calanthia says softly just as he is about to touch flip the lights on.

“Thank you for coming at such short notice,” Jack says, moving his hand away from the switch. “But Will has a hunch that we’re working on a very tight schedule.”

“It's no trouble. It's a beautiful night for a flight,” Calanthia says, turning around and opening her eyes. She stares right at Will. “What's the problem?”

“We think one of the people who helped Jesse kill his family is a boy named C.J. Lincoln. If we've got the right person, then he's turning 18 on Friday,” Jack says.

“And you think that once he presents and his daemon settles, they will try to stretch their Tether.”

“Yes,” Will says quietly. “We need to know how the process works.”

“It's against clan code to tell outsiders where we perform our lengthening rites or what must be done to complete them,” Calanthia says. “Both for the sake of tradition and for the safety of humans who would try to replicate the rite.”

Will can feel the low level of unease bubbling in Sabine start to strengthen. *Does Jack know about us?* she whispers through the Tether. *If he does, he'll try to use us as leverage. Try to claim we're Witch enough to know.*

The palms of Will’s hands start to sweat even as his fists clench tighter at his sides. He looks out of the corner of his eye to Jack, not daring to move his head lest the motion attract attention.

But Jack does not turn to fix Will with a pointed look. Instead, he takes a step toward the Witch and says, “I understand that. But the stakes here-”

Calanthia interrupts wordlessly with the raising of her right hand. When Jack falls silent, she continues, “However, I can certainly speak in generalities. Perhaps even very specific generalities.”

At this, Jack does turn to catch Will's eye. There's nothing there to make Will suspect that Jack knows about the nature of his mother, only a conspiratorial gleam that he seems to expect Will to share. Will smiles back awkwardly, unsure if he should be relieved or further concerned about keeping such a large, ungainly secret from someone who is essentially his boss.

Jack turns back to Calanthia. “What generalities can you share with us?”

“There are places in the world where daemons cannot tread, be it by land, water, or air. Most of these locations lie deep in Witch territory and are strictly off-limits to humans. Unseen and unmarked on any map a human may access. Others are more accessible and, therefore, extremely dangerous. To travel through them is to be torn from your daemon while still alive, to experience death or hell itself. The weak or unprepared cannot survive such an experience,” Calanthia says, her voice low and steady. “Clans seek the hell that's closest to home.”

There is a quiet, heavy moment as her words sink in. Will breaks it by taking in a small, sharp breath. “If we don't make it in time,” he begins, his words hesitant, “is there anything we could do?”

Before Calanthia can answer, Jack's phone buzzes aggressively. The sudden sound nearly gives Will a heart attack, and his shoulder collides sharply with the wall behind him. A metal tack from the map falls to the floor with a soft *clack.*

“I have to take this,” Jack mutters by way of apology. He answers the call and holds the phone up to his ear. “Crawford.”

Will watches Jack's expression and posture change as he listens to the person on the other end of the line. His back straightens. His broad shoulders push back. His mouth draws down and tightens, and this is when Will becomes keenly aware that whatever news Jack is learning can’t be anything good.

The tension building up within Jack becomes too much for Will to look at, so he casts his gaze down to floor and to the tack resting near his foot. He leans down and picks it up, watching as the sharp tip reflects the moonlight. He turns his attention to the map of the country. He could just jam the tack anywhere into the map, but he finds his eyes scanning the area around C.J.’s hometown of Bakersfield.

“I'll send some people out right away,” Jack says. He falls silent again for a moment. “No, I won't be there. We’ve got the chance to catch the perpetrators.”

Clans seek the hell that's closest to home, Sabine repeats thoughtfully as she crawls up out of the security of her pocket to peer at the map.

Will's eyes land on a patch of land that would be a few hours out from Bakersfield. A place where the criss-crossing veins that make up the interstate highway system stop dead in their tracks. A place with a very suspicious name.

He looks to Calanthia, who is watching him with gentle curiosity. He takes the tack and presses it into the map just above the words “DEATH VALLEY PROTECTED AREA”. Calanthia gives a single, slow nod.

“Right. I'll keep you updated,” Jack says. He ends the call and immediately brings his hand up to press at the bridge of his nose. “That was the Huntsville PD. The Frists are dead. And there is an unidentified child charred in their fireplace. The body is… they're going to have to rely on dental records.”

“It’ll be Conner,” Will says. “He failed the test that Jesse Turner passed.”

When Jack’s hand drops from his face, Will can see that what little patience Jack may have had has completely evaporated from his eyes. “Where are they going?”

Will turns back to the map. “The Turners were killed in Bangor, Maine,” he says, pointing to the far northeast of the map. His finger trails south and west, landing over Huntsville. “And the Frists in Huntsville.”

His finger moves again, and he taps over Bakersfield. “C.J. Lincoln is from Bakersfield. The first thing we need to do is confirm whether or not the Lincolns are dead. If they are, then what I'm about to say next goes out the window. Everything will need to be reevaluated in that case. But if they haven't been killed yet - and it is a *yet* - then I think this group is moving along a parabola that started in Maine. Along the way, they've been… cleaning up all the loose ends. Given the tight timeline before C.J. settles, I'd guess that the unknown fourth child's family is not located between Huntsville and Bakersfield. Probably in northern California or up towards Oregon or Washington. ”

“And what about the place where they're going to try the Tether-lengthening rite?”

Will points to the tack. “Death Valley.”

Jack turns to Calanthia, perhaps seeking confirmation. From Will's perspective, the Witch's expression remains a perfectly still and placid poker face, but Jack must see something there that satisfies him because eventually he nods. Themis trots towards the door in anticipation.

“I'm going to send Price and Zeller to Huntsville to gather data. Katz will come with us to the Death Valley area as we try to head them off,” Jack says. Grimly, he adds, “She’s a better shot than those two combined.”

“When do we leave?” Will sighs, running his hand through his hair.

“No later than tomorrow afternoon,” Jack says. He turns his attention to Calanthia. “Once again, thank you so much for coming out to help us on this. If you'd like to head back to your territory, you can do so at any time.”

“I'd like to have a word with Will first,” Calanthia says. “Privately.”

Sabine, who had been clinging high near the rim of her pocket, sinks down deeper into the safety of the dark. Will swallows heavily and looks to Jack, hoping that perhaps he will deny the request on the basis that their schedule is too tight.

But Jack simply joins Themis by the door. His dog daemon casts her sharp brown eyes over Will and Calanthia, scrutinizing but not suspicious. “Go home and get some rest when you're done, Will,” Jack says. “I'll be in touch for travel arrangements tomorrow.”

Torn between a desire to protest and the knowledge that it's never wise to deny a Witch her request, Will ends up doing nothing. He watches Jack and Themis leave with a sense of numbed confusion.

“Come stand beside me,” Calanthia says. When Will hesitates, she chuckles. “I don’t bite, boy.”

Will hesitantly acquiesces, moving towards the window but keeping several feet away from the Witch. She has turned back to face the smooth, clear glass that looks out into the quadrangle. For a moment, Will keeps his eyes on Calanthia, as if expecting her to lunge at him suddenly. But she simply looks out the window toward the copse of trees out in the distance. Slowly, Will turns his attention to the trees as well, and he notices something gleaming white in the treetops. He squints and realizes that it’s Ambrosios, Calanthia's owl daemon, staring up at the moon.

“The sky was this clear and beautiful the night I lost my son,” Calanthia says quietly.

Will jolts, surprised by hearing her admit such sensitive personal information. “Oh, um. I'm sorry that it reminds you of his death.”

“Oh, he's probably still alive,” Calanthia says. Upon seeing Will's confused expression, she continues, “When my son was born, he was my daughter. As he grew, he fit in poorly with other Witchlings his age. When his daemon settled in the form of a bobcat and not a bird, everyone in the clan thought he was the victim of a horrible curse, or perhaps a changeling sent to ruin us from within. He told me he wanted to go out into the world and live as a man, not a Witch, but he still wanted to leave on good terms. I told him he was no child of mine and that I never wanted to see him again.”

Calanthia swallows thickly, regret tugging at her brow. “There are other ways to lose a loved one than through death. Ways that feel far more permanent. Even if I regret it now and have worked to change the way my clan views people like him, it still stings. Some sins burn a scar across your foolish heart.”

Will relaxes slightly. “It may not mean much, but if I ever meet your son out there in the world, I'll tell him you want to reconcile,” he says. “Even though with your lifespans, you're

much more likely to find him than I am."

Calanthia is silent for a moment before she chuckles quietly. "I wouldn't be so sure of that," she says.

Before Will can ask what she means, she closes her eyes and tilts her head back slightly. "Humor me, Will: close your eyes like I have."

Even with the ice somewhat broken by Calanthia's vulnerable story, Will and Sabine share a wordless, uneasy tug through the Tether. Neither is sure what the Witch is trying to prove. After a moment of quiet deliberation, Will shuts his eyes.

"Do you feel it?" Calanthia asks.

"I don't underst-" Will begins, but the words die in his throat. He does feel something. It's very faint, and it's unlike anything Will has ever felt in his life. It's similar to silk, but more delicate and gentle by several thousand orders of magnitude.

Will's eyes jolt open and he looks to the Witch to see if she has done anything to him. But she hasn't moved from her spot at all, and her face is still smooth with a quiet, bittersweet peace in her expression.

"What was that?" Will asks, his voice shaking.

A slow smile spreads across Calanthia's lips. "The texture of moonlight," she says quietly. "Goodnight, Will."

With that, she grabs the branch of blood-drop maple in her left hand, hitches her skirts with her right, and steps over the sill and through the window out into the night as if the glass is little more than a mild inconvenience. Will watches as she moves out toward the copse of trees, and Ambrosios takes off into the night air ahead of her. She holds up the branch of blood-drop maple, and Will marvels at how the eternally red leaves look black in the light of the moon.

As if she weighs nothing at all, the Witch rises into the air and glides smoothly out into the dark night.

Will brings his hand up and holds the palm out. He thinks about pressing it against the window, about feeling the cool, solid reassurance of the glass. But he remembers the ethereal caress of the moon's light against his skin, and he tries to imagine what he would do if he pressed his hand against the glass and it passed through.

He lowers his hand without trying.

The whole drive back to Wolf Trap, he feels the moon against his cheek like a mother's kiss.

*****

When he arrives home, the dogs meet him with full force. They're seven furry balls of wiggling, slobbering, barking excitement when he finally steps through the door. About half

of them crowd him, seeking attention directly, while the other half dart past him to run around outside, perhaps trying to cajole him into running around with them.

Despite the exhaustion and confusion flooding his system, genuine happiness floats up and buoys Will as he greets his dogs. In all the chaos, he spots Buster, a little terrier mix, sitting mournfully by his food bowl and gazing up at him with betrayed, pleading eyes.

“Little liar,” Will laughs fondly. “I know Alana fed you. You still have food clinging to your muzzle.”

He lets the dogs wear themselves out for a few minutes before wandering off to take a blisteringly hot shower. He focuses on washing away the grit of such a long day, trying not to let his mind slip to either the case or the strange moment with the Witch.

As he walks back into the living room while toweling his hair, Will notices that something new has attracted the dogs’ attention. They're all crowded near one of the windows, tails wagging expectantly.

“What is it?” Will asks them. He looks at Winston, who is hanging back slightly compared to the rest of his new pack mates. “A bat? Possum?”

He moves to the window, shooing the curious dogs away. He cracks the window slightly and peers out. A few drops of water still clinging to his hair fall and splatter on the sill as he looks out into the night. He doesn't hear anything either, and he supposes either he or the dogs spooked whatever it was that had been hanging around.

As he brushes his teeth and readies himself for bed, Will checks in a couple of times to see if the dogs are still obsessed with the window. They seem reticent to leave their mysterious quarry alone, but eventually they start to wander elsewhere. By the time Will sits on the edge of his bed, they have all settled in elsewhere, be it in their own beds or happily gnawing on a well-loved toy.

Will finally lies down after such a long day, and Sabine crawls into a crevice made by their rumpled sheets. Sleep comes for them quickly, but just as he’s drifting off, Will thinks he hears the soft sound of rustling leaves or feathers in the bush outside the window. Then the quiet *tik-tik-tik* of sharp little claws against the wood of the sill. He has a brief sensation of being watched, but he is so close to sleep that he slips into unconsciousness before he can process the information further.

His dreams are disjointed, more snippets of sensations than anything else. The moon, so huge and looming that it may be on a collision course with the earth, and an indistinct silhouette rendered pitch black against its eerie light. A female voice that is faintly familiar whispering to him in a language he does not recognize. An ungodly itch on his arm that, when scratched, reveals countless painful black bumps - pinfeathers that ooze dark, thick blood when he damages their roots.

When his phone wakes him up the following morning, his dreams are half-remembered and fading fast.

*****

Jack, Beverly, and Will land in Las Vegas at a little after 8 PM local time. From there, it's another two hours in a rental car heading northwest to a motel in Beatty, Nevada, a speck of a town on the outskirts of the protected area. With a whole day taken up with travel, both Will and Beverly can feel the tension radiating off of Jack and Themis. It's enough that Beverly only gets about halfway through cracking a joke about this not being the big Vegas party weekend she had expected.

After a night of tossing and turning on an overly firm motel mattress, Will joins Jack and Beverly at dawn for a mediocre continental breakfast in the motel's dining area.

“God, it's so dry here,” Beverly complains, piling a plate with rubbery scrambled eggs from the breakfast buffet. Her otter daemon ruffles his fur, clearly sharing her irritation. “If Hartwin and I dry up into sand and blow away, remember us as we were in better, more humid times.”

“We don't distribute pensions to the families of agents who blow away on the job,” Jack says as he studies the map.

“Bummer.”

It's not just arid, Sabine thinks. *Some of… whatever it is… is in the air.*

Will knows what she's saying is true. There’s a strange, uneasy feeling in the air, slight but present all the same. The sensation is difficult for him to put in to words, but it's similar to vertigo. He wonders if it's the relative proximity to a space where daemons physically can’t tread. If Jack, Beverly, and the residents of this little towns are just vaguely uncomfortable, Will supposes he must be sensitive to the void that lies only miles away.

He jolts slightly when the flat screen TV mounted to the wall in front of him flares to life. He looks over his shoulder to the reception desk at the other end of the room and sees an Omega receptionist in his late teens or early twenties putting the remote away. His tortoiseshell daemon sits on the desk, her fluffy tail flicking slightly as she stares into the dining area.

Unfortunately, the TV is set to channel that is news in name only. The four insipid morning hosts all grin into the camera with smiles that are too wide, with teeth too white, and their serpent daemons drape gracefully across their shoulders. Will tries to tune their noise out.

“So what's the plan?” Beverly asks.

“The Death Valley protected area has federally-appointed rangers to guard the dangerous land,” Jack says. He takes a sip of the motel's coffee and scowls at the flavor. “I've asked the lead ranger to meet us here so we can plan things out. He should be here sometime in the next half hour.”

“It's a big area, Jack. And we don't have much time. C.J. could settle any time after midnight tonight. What if they want to go through with the rite at 1 AM?”

“Then we’ll be ready to strike at midnight. I’ll stake out the whole California-Nevada border if I have to.”

“Is there an average time for settling?” Beverly wonders. “Obviously it wouldn't be a perfect predictor, but it might give us something to work with.”

“I woke up with Themis already settled,” Jack says.

“Same,” says Beverly, stroking the fur at the top of Hartwin's head. “Wasn’t really expecting to be an Alpha, though. Betas run in my family.”

Together, Beverly and Jack turn their attention to Will, who frowns at their scrutiny. “I was kind of… distracted until around noon,” he mutters. “Could have been anywhere before that.”

“Hard to say, then,” Jack says.

The memories of that first heat threaten to rear up in Will's mind. He tries to fight them down and, seeing any form of distraction as a positive no matter how repellent it would normally be, looks up at the TV. What he sees there successfully blasts his memories away. “Shit,” he breathes.

The chyron at the bottom of the screen reads ‘SECOND FAMILY KILLED BY FANTASY-OBSESSED KIDS’, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. The four hosts have acquired a guest. Freddie Lounds sits proudly on the interview couch, her ferret daemon sprawled across her lap.

“Hey!” Jack calls to the Omega receptionist. “Could you turn up the TV volume?”

“- happened in Huntsville is just tragic,” says the blond male host, his voice increasing with the volume of the TV. “Ms. Lounds, would you say that these murders have happened because today's youth have no respect for traditional family?”

“Oh, absolutely, Steve,” Lounds croons. “They've been led astray by the media and brainwashed by these little internet clubs they're in. The same thing happened in the 80s with role playing games and the 90s with violent video games and rap music.”

“What a crock of shit,” Beverly growls as the hosts exchange concerns about the state of culture today. “She doesn't believe any of this! She's just telling them what they want to hear!”

“Anything for a buck,” Jack agrees darkly. “What I want to know is how she found out about some of these details.”

“Do you think more good, upstanding families like the Turners and Frists are in danger?” the same host asks Lounds.

“Definitely. Every traditional family is at risk from this radicalization,” she says. “I would recommend that all concerned viewers visit my website for more information on how to protect-”

“Worthless,” Jack growls. He turns back to the receptionist and calls, “Could you change it to the weather or something?”

“Why's it matter?” the young Omega asks. “Here’s the forecast for the next zillion years: hot and dry, hot and dry, hot and-”

“Just change it to any other channel, okay?”

The Omega mutters something about how Jack was the one to ask for the increase in volume, but he switches the TV to an innocuous cooking channel and goes back to ignoring them by scrolling on his phone.

“Great,” Jack grumbles as he turns back to Will and Beverly. “Think we need to worry about Lounds turning up here?”

“Pretty sure that awful show is live,” Beverly says. “Doubt she could get here from New York City with enough time to wreck things for us. I'd almost be impressed if she did.”

Will hears the jingle of the bell over the door. Half expecting to see a mop of fiery red hair, he turns to get a look. Fortunately it is not Freddie Lounds who has entered the premises but a tall, muscular Alpha in his early 40s. His features are strong and chiseled, but in the somewhat worn and sandblasted way that some people who don't believe in sunscreen can get. His daemon, a skinny coyote, trails in leisurely behind him. He grins and winks familiarly at the Omega, who blushes scarlet at the attention.

Ugh, Sabine thinks. Will agrees wholeheartedly.

“You must be Special Agent Crawford,” the man drawls as he ambles over to their table.

“And you must be Ranger Meacham,” Jack replies, standing and shaking the man's hand.

“Please, just Dwight'll do,” the ranger says. He gestures to his daemon. “This here’s Jessamine.”

“Themis,” Jack says as Jessamine and Themis become acquainted with a few curious sniffs. Will always finds himself slightly envious of how easily canid daemons seem to appraise each other. “These are my fellow agents, Beverly Katz and Hartwin and Will Graham and Sabine.”

Dwight gives a friendly nod to Beverly and, while the grin never leaves his lips, something sharp enters his eyes when he looks to Will. Will immediately tries to look anywhere else but the disdain in those green eyes, and he ends up fixating on his own plate of cold, half-eaten toast.

“I'll have to take your word on his daemon since I don’t see anything,” Meacham says, chuckling. “But not often you see an Omega on big murder cases like this. Is this ‘cause there's kids involved?”

Sabine is immediately furious and affronted, filling the Tether between herself and Will with memories of their work. Countless crime scene photos, the bodies inside debased or warped

by dark designs. The field kabuki display of Cassie Boyle. The deaths of the Turner family at the hands of their own child. The weight of the gun in his own hand after shooting Garrett Jacob Hobbs' daemon until the great and powerful stag evaporated into Dust.

"How many crimes have you solved, ranger? No, not just solved. *Seen.*. And I'm not talking about drunk teens joyriding in the desert and getting a little too close to the land that can rip their Tethers apart, or a meth lab exploding and a test tube getting embedded in some poor idiot's skull. I'm talking about murder," Will snaps. He pauses briefly before looking back into Meacham's eyes. "Have you ever killed a murderer? I have."

Meacham stares at Will for a moment, his nostrils flaring with fury. He looks to Jack and Beverly. "You two let him mouth off like that?"

Beverly opens her mouth, clearly about to give Meacham a dressing-down of her own, but Jack holds up a hand to stop her. "We don't have time for this," he says, his voice low and measured. "Let's focus on capturing these people."

Will isn't thrilled that Jack has chosen the magnanimous route, but he can't say he's surprised. If this creep is going to be their primary point of contact for getting the rangers and local police officers to coordinate with them, then what's one Omega's pride worth? Sabine is still a ball of barely-contained righteous indignation, and Will knows that if she was out in the open her colors would be the same furious red and black of hot coal.

The planning conversation is tense, but luckily Jack keeps everyone on track. With Meacham glowering at him whenever he can get away with it, Will doesn't feel comfortable interjecting. It's not like he has much to contribute, anyway; he doesn't know the area, and even with Calanthia's rather opaque help, he isn't exactly sure what the rite entails.

A little after ten in the morning, they head out to do a sweep of the major roads nearby. Jack and Meacham will head north in the ranger's Jeep while Beverly and Will will take the rental car south. The goal is to make one large loop around the protected area and meet for reconnaissance on the west end of the perimeter.

Will is all-too-pleased to get away from Meacham.

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There's a harsh, pragmatic beauty to the desert. Without the resources of fertile soil and nourishing rain, the plants and animals must get creative to make the most of what they have. A cactus can sprout a beautiful flower for pollination, but it still covers itself in needles to protect its precious stores of water. Desert poppy seeds lie dormant for years through drought. Vultures pick at the bones of those who couldn't stand the blistering sun and recycle their nutrients back into the ecosystem for redistribution.

Will respects the sprawling land zipping by outside his passenger window, even if it is rather alien to him. Being raised on the water due to his father's daemon, Will was well into his 20s before he ever stepped foot in a place that had a humidity level below 70%. Until he learned about the existence of deserts in elementary school, he probably would have had a hard time believing such a place could exist.

About fifteen minutes into the drive, Will's roaming thoughts are interrupted by Beverly clearing her throat. “Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“What that guy said to you back at the motel was screwed up,” Beverly says. “Just thought I'd put that out there. I'm not happy that we have to put up with him.”

“Thanks.”

“It just… it sucks that you have to hear that kind of trash and it sucks that creeps like that make us Alphas look like knuckle-dragging neanderthals.”

“Hey now, that's a bit much,” Will says. “That comparison is going to make neanderthals roll in their graves.”

“Quick, check Twitter and see if there are reports of old skeletons twirling around in the glass cases of natural history museums.”

Will and Beverly share a laugh which is cut short by the sound of Will's phone ringing in his pants pocket. “Damn, you get reception out here?” Beverly asks. “We're on the perimeter of an actual-factual dead zone, not just a metaphorical one.”

“I live in the middle of nowhere. Gotta spring for the plan with the most coverage I can get,” Will says. He doesn't recognize the phone number immediately, but it does have a Baltimore area code. “Mind if I-”

“Go ahead.”

“Will Graham speaking,” Will says, answering the phone.

“Good morning, Will. I hope I'm not interrupting anything.”

“Dr. Lecter? Uh, no, it's fine,” Will says, trying to keep confusion out of his voice.

“That’s good. Alana informed me that you asked her to tend to your dogs while you're out in the field. Unfortunately, she has to leave town herself - her brother has gone into labor three weeks early. I would like to offer my assistance since she'll be unavailable.”

“Shit,” Will breathes. “Uh, not about your offer, of course. Um. Thank you for being willing to do that for me. That would be a huge help.”

“No trouble, Will,” Hannibal says, and Will can hear the smile in the Alpha's voice. “How is the case going?”

“Better now that Beverly and I are patrolling for anything suspicious.”

“Better?”

“It's nothing serious. Just…” He pauses, remembering the way Meacham made his skin crawl, knowing that the Alpha must have made himself a pest to all Omegas in the area in one way or another. He sighs, and the sound comes out more like a hiss. “The lead ranger here, Meacham, has some ideas about Omegas that are… old-fashioned, to put it charitably. And not shy about sharing his thoughts.”

Hannibal is silent for a moment, long enough that Will starts to wonder if the call has dropped. Finally, Hannibal speaks again. “In other words, incredibly rude.”

“That’d be more accurate, yeah.”

“What an unsavory trait. Perhaps one day this ranger will learn to have better taste,” Hannibal says. Will can hear the faint sound of pen against paper. “Well, I won't keep you any longer. I'll look after the dogs until you get back. Take care, Will.”

“Thanks again. Will do.”

When he hangs up and returns his phone to his pocket, he can feel Beverly looking at him. “Keep your eyes on the road,” he grumbles.

Beverly chuckles. “Sounds like that was a fun call.”

“It was just Dr. Lecter offering to feed my dogs. I asked Alana, but her brother went into labor.”

“Oh crap, Levi's having the baby?”

“I guess. I didn't even know she had a brother, let alone that she was going to become an aunt so soon.”

“Uh,” Beverly says, drawing out the sound. “Don’t feel worse about it, but um... she has three brothers. And two nieces already.”

“Guess you don’t learn much about people’s private lives when you're a crazy old dog Omega.”

He can feel uneasiness fill the car as if it were a cloud of noxious gas. “That was supposed to be a joke,” he adds. “Not self-pity. It’s not like I'm standing out in the rain looking and feeling pathetic while the cool kids are at prom. I enjoy my life the way it is.”

Beverly gives a small hum in response, and Will isn't sure if she believes him. He doesn't want to press the issue and look desperate to prove her doubt and pity wrong. He distracts himself by returning his gaze to the endless expanse of sand, rock, and sparse shrubland outside his window.

They drive along in awkward silence for several more minutes until Will sees a large roadside billboard coming up on the left side of the road, one of many put out to warn drivers to the dangers of going off-road. It mentions the extreme temperatures and lack of medical resources nearby, and that this is a sensitive ecological area best left unspoiled, but doesn't say that going too far in could do irreparable things to the Tether between yourself and your

daemon. Will's torn on that choice. On the one hand, it runs the risk of some poor ignorant fool choosing to ignore the other warnings and running afoul of whatever strange force moves in this place. On the other, it doesn't alert the thrill-seeking, the despairing, or the overly-ambitious either.

As they get closer, Will notices something strange about the dusty metal base of the sign. “Slow down. Something's behind that sign,” he says.

Beverly pulls the car into the meager shoulder and stops by the sign. She shares a look with Will, and both wordlessly ready their guns. As they approach the sign, Hartwin keeps close behind Beverly, using her legs as a shield.

Hidden in the long shadow of the sign is an old RV covered with a large beige tarp, probably meant to obscure the vehicle against the colors of the desert. There are clear footprints in the sand around the RV, what looks to be four sets in total. They lead to a spot on the road and vanish from there.

“Are they hitchhiking?” Beverly asks as she looks down to where the footprints vanish.

“Too suspicious. I'd bet that if we called Price and Zeller they'd tell us that the Frist’s vehicle was stolen. C.J. probably drove behind the RV all the way from Alabama, and now they're using the car to get around until C.J.’s, uh… big event. Faster acceleration if they need to evade. Maybe an SUV that can go off-road.”

Together, they approach the RV. However unlikely, there’s still a greater than zero chance that the RV is rigged with traps or that one of the group stayed behind to protect it.

Beverly tentatively pulls the tarp up and looks in through the window. “There’s still some stuff in here,” she remarks.

Will nods as he looks down the empty stretch of road past the footprints. “They're planning on coming back.”

It takes Jack and Meacham less than an hour to arrive with four other vehicles trailing behind. Two are state highway patrol cars, one each from California and Nevada, and the other two belong to the Death Valley ranger department. The patrol cars turn on their lights and block off the highways.

Will makes a point to stay far away from Meacham, and luckily Jack seems to be on the same page. Meacham and the other rangers don't come near the RV, keeping themselves occupied by discussing something with the Nevada highway patrol.

All of the items left in the RV are goods that won't warp or become damaged by the blisteringly hot sun: clothing, toothbrushes, books, and half-empty chip bags. While cataloging everything as evidence with Beverly, Will finds one thing that immediately draws his attention.

It's a large, dark blue Moleskine sketchbook. Carefully, Will flips through the pages. All of the art inside is very well rendered, especially for someone as young and likely lacking in

special technical training as C.J. Lincoln. There are sketches of scenes that clearly come from the Gallagher Dare series, with the young Witchborn hero and his friends doing everything from trying to escape a fearsome dragon to lounging peacefully in a sun-dappled garden.

Will turns the page after looking at a sketch of Gallagher arguing with his stylish, cunning rival Fionn, and his heart skips a beat knowing that what he is now looking at is a vital clue. Instead of fanart, this piece is a portrait that features a few very familiar faces: C.J., Jesse, and Conner all grinning, frozen in time and happiness before the plan to kill their biological parents. Before Conner's failure and subsequent violent rejection. There are two other faces that Will does not recognize, and he realizes that one must be the as-yet unidentified boy and the other WitchWay.

The unidentified boy, who at approximately ten or eleven years old is clearly the youngest member of this dangerous makeshift family, looks significantly less comfortable than his "brothers", with his smile tight and his brow furrowed slightly. Now that Will looks closer, all of the boys display a spectrum of unease. The young boy is visibly unsettled, then Conner and the way his smile only rises on one side of his lips, then Jesse and the way the light reflecting from his glasses obscures his eyes, and then C.J. himself with a slight furrow to his brow. Will can't help but wonder if the art is a subconscious cry for help or if it is just an accurate representation of how the boys have looked over the past year.

WitchWay herself looks delighted, though her joy has a touch of delirium about it. Her harpy eagle daemon's double crest of dark feathers is particularly wild and unkempt.

"You won't need a sketch artist," Will says as he approaches Jack, who is watching Beverly carefully examine the clothing for any useful fiber evidence. "C.J. Lincoln already did the job for you."

He hands the sketchbook over to Jack, who takes a quick look at the family portrait before his eyes light up with intent. Jack rips the page from the book, and Will and Sabine can't help but wince at the manhandling of C.J.'s sketchbook. That's the problem with unconditional empathy; even though these kids have killed two families with two more on their to-do list, he still feels the sting of knowing the work of such a young talent will be ripped apart or left to succumb to dry rot in storage.

"Get this out to every town in a 200 mile radius," Jack instructs one of the highway patrol officers, handing her the sketch on top of the book. "I want everyone to know their faces. After that, go through the rest of the book for further clues."

When the officer leaves to complete her task, Jack turns back to Will. "There is one thing that doesn't make sense to me. The way they tried to hide the RV is frankly laughable. Why get sloppy now?"

"We aren't dealing with criminal masterminds here," Will says. "They've been sloppy the whole time. Fingerprints and footprints left behind, hiding the RV the way a three year old hides themself under a sheet behind the door… They're brainwashed kids and a woman who took advantage of their trust, all to live out a twisted family fantasy. The only reason they've gotten as far as they have is because they had a massive head start. That's all."

Not long after, a tow truck arrives to haul the RV to the nearest town with an air conditioned garage to be fully picked over with a fine-toothed comb. WitchWay and her ill-gotten family may be out celebrating C.J.'s upcoming birthday in one of the nearby towns in an effort to improve some of the morale surely lost in Huntsville. They may even be as far out as Las Vegas. But now the closest thing they've had to a home in a year is gone, leaving behind only rapidly-vanishing tracks in the sand behind the rusted road sign.

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The rest of the day moves by agonizingly slowly.

Even though there are many long months until summer, the temperature tops out at just over 100 degrees in the peak of the day. They spend a few more miserable hours out in the desert patrolling the perimeter but with no cloud cover to diminish the strength of the blazing sun overhead, it soon becomes clear that Jack, Will, and especially poor Beverly and Hartwin are not acclimated to the harsh conditions.

They retreat back to the motel in Beatty, where Jack once again conscripts the dining area into a makeshift command center. Beverly assists him in compiling all the information that they currently have and acting as a liaison to the increasing numbers of California and Nevada police officers trickling into the area, though occasionally she takes a break to mist Hartwin over using a spray bottle she acquired from the local hardware store.

Will wants to help, but Meacham always seems to be underfoot, ready to scoff or sneer at whatever he has to contribute. Eventually Will starts clasping his hand over Sabine's spot in his pocket, keeping the increasingly riled daemon from bursting out and doing or saying something they both might regret. With tensions rising just like the thermometer outside, Jack sends Will off to his motel room to shower and rest up, reasoning that the team will need him sharp in case they corner WitchWay and the boys in the early hours of the morning.

And so Will stands under a spray of lukewarm water in his room's attached bathroom, glaring at the yellowing grout between the shower's off-white tiling. While Sabine grouses in her gravelly voice about the glaring sun outside, about the eerie feeling that the protected area gives off, about arrogant and cruel Alphas, Will tries not to notice the dark, twisting shadows in his peripheral vision on the other side of the shower curtain. Daring him to notice, tempting him to look.

"Stop it," he whispers to whoever or whatever will hear. Sabine immediately goes silent halfway through a sentence.

He shuts his eyes tight and tries to wash the unease away.

*****

At just before 11 o'clock at night, Jack decides it's time to be on the move around the perimeter. On their way out of the motel, Will catches a glimpse of the TV in the dining area. The local news is showing the drawing from C.J.'s sketchbook.

Outside, all of the heat that had cooked the land just a few hours prior is gone entirely. The night air is not exactly cold, but the nearly 40 degree difference between the low 100s and the mid-60s is palpable enough to make goosebumps rise on Will's arms. The night desert and day desert may as well be two entirely separate planets for all their difference.

Meacham insists on patrolling his stretch of land solo. No amount of reasoning from Jack, the other rangers, or the police officers can sway his arrogance.

“I know this land like a lover,” he says, trying to catch Will's eyes with a taunting smirk.

Will keeps his eyes on the ground, thinking about how many secrets lovers keep from each other. Everything from the unseen freckles that could be hidden on the scalp to the unspoken opinions that could ruin the whole relationship. And above all else, he thinks of how many people are killed by their lovers.

But Will is happy to watch the ranger and his coyote daemon leave for their post, and if Sabine wishes that WitchWay and her brood do them harm, then he doesn't chastise her.

Before heading out to their assigned posts around the perimeter, every group received their own kit containing a handheld transceiver for communication and a uniquely-colored flare in case things really take a bad turn. Beverly, Jack, and Will's flare is bright red. Will imagines its light blazing overhead like a furious dying sun the whole trip to their stakeout point.

11 becomes midnight. The witching hours are upon them. They wait and wait and wait for any sign of WitchWay's “family” or word from one of the other groups set up around the perimeter. The moon may no longer be as full as it was only a few days ago, but it's still bright enough to light up the desert that Will can easily see by it. Without a large city anywhere nearby to pollute the sky, the stars are vibrant and numerous. If the moon were less luminous, Will is sure that the Milky Way would be in full display over the flats, dunes, and rocky outcroppings that make up the desert.

Will tries not to think about the faint silky caresses of the moon and light tingling of the stars against his skin.

Finally, at half-past four in the morning, the silence and stillness of the night is interrupted by four distant, echoing gunshots. Beverly is up and on her feet instantly, with Hartwin jolting from drowsiness to manic scampering in an instant. She looks out over the desert. “Can anyone tell where it came from?”

Themis tilts her head, trying to pinpoint the sound with her keen ears. After a moment, she looks up to Jack, who shakes his head. “Too much echo.”

Just as Will grabs the handheld transceiver in order to start calling the other groups one by one, a flare spirals up into the sky in the distance. It's a vibrant orange, the same color as a traffic cone.

“That's Meacham's flare,” Beverly says.

Jack grunts irritably. “So even odds on if he just shot WitchWay and the three kids or if his pride got him into trouble.”

Far off, the sound of a police siren warbles in the night air like the call of some strange nocturnal bird. Other distant sirens join in only a moment later.

“Sounds like everyone has the same idea,” Jack says. “Let's head to his coordinates.”

*****

They are the first group to arrive at Meacham's assigned location. From the road, Jack, Beverly, and Will can’t see the ranger anywhere. They call out his name as they leave their car, and Jessamine limps out from behind a nearby boulder. Beverly stays behind to watch the area while Jack and Will head towards Meacham's daemon. As they approach, Will sees a trail of blood glimmering in the moonlight that leads to the incapacitated ranger, who has dragged himself behind the boulder for cover. The spent flare gun lies at his side.

“Little shits shot out my knee!” Meacham growls, bloodied hands grasping at the grisly wound in his leg. His handheld transceiver lies shattered a few yards away, apparently shot as well.

“Which one shot you?” Jack asks.

“Hell if I know! They snuck up on me!”

“Which way did they go?”

Meacham lifts his hand and points off toward the center of the protected area, his own blood dripping off of his palm to splatter against his worn jeans.

Will hears the slamming of a car door and turns to see that one of the other police cars has arrived. Beverly waves the officers in Meacham's direction.

“Backup’s here,” Jack says. “They’ll get you to a hospital.”

“Fat lotta good that'll do,” Meacham says, laughing bitterly. “I'll be a goddamned cripple.”

Will looks down at the blood soaking into Meacham's pants before sweeping his gaze up as high as Meacham's weathered, unshaven chin. He doesn't dare meet Meacham's eyes; not because he is afraid of the scorn that he will see there, but because he doesn't trust that he will be able to keep the loathing he has for this hateful man and the satisfaction at seeing him struck down out of his own eyes.

As the police tend to Meacham, Will follows Jack toward the dangerous off-limits area in pursuit of WitchWay and the boys, with Beverly not far behind.

Every step closer toward the anomalous area makes the latent unease Will has been feeling since early in the morning intensify. It's as if he is stepping further and further into a strange electrical or magnetic field, as if every single cell in his body and every speck of Dust in Sabine are reacting in unusual ways. He looks ahead and sees the short hair raising on

Themis' haunches, and it is then that Will knows that even if he is feeling the phenomenon more strongly that Jack and Beverly, they must not be wholly immune.

He's so wrapped up in his thoughts that he nearly collides with Jack's solid back when the Alpha suddenly stops. Jack holds out a hand to signal for Beverly and Will to stay still before slowly pointing forward with that same hand.

Will has to inch around Jack to see. About fifty feet away, WitchWay, Jesse, and the unidentified boy hold hands in a line. They face out toward the anomalous land, which appears to be a wide, cracked salt flat that stretches out as far as Will can see.

A little creature lies writhing and tormented besides WitchWay's feet. It takes a while for it to twist in a way that allows Will to guess what it is. When Will sees the furry membrane between its paw and body, Will knows that C.J.'s daemon has settled as a flying squirrel. Not quite the bird daemon that Witches are so renown for having.

As for C.J. himself, the young man lies on the ground of the salt flat several yards out from where his "family" stands. He reaches forwards with both arms and slowly drags himself a few inches further, an unearthly groan of agony rising from his throat as he moves.

"You can do it, C.J.!" the woman calls out, elation in her voice. "Mama's so proud of you!"

Jack gestures for Will and Beverly to follow him slowly and to keep their guns at the ready. They move as silently as they can, closing distance between the strange ceremony and themselves.

When they're about twenty feet from WitchWay and the boys, they freeze when they see the unidentified boy turn his head slightly. Will knows the boy has seen them because even in the darkness and from a distance, the child's wide, alarmed eyes are clearly visible. His daemon can't decide if she wants to take on the shape of a jackrabbit or a bear cub.

Jack holds a finger up to his lips in a *Shh!* gesture. The boy looks up at WitchWay, who is staring transfixed out at C.J., and then back to Jack.

He turns forward again. "Mom?" he says, his voice trembling. "My shoe's untied. Can I tie it?"

"Of course, baby. But hurry up - your brother needs all the encouragement he can get."

The boy removes his hand from WitchWay's grip. Then, he takes a step back. And another. And another. Then, all at once, the boy's daemon decides to hold her shape as a jackrabbit, and she and the boy both bolt towards Will, Jack, and Beverly.

Jesse and WitchWay turn around in surprise just as the boy hides behind Jack. The beta woman looks stunned for a moment before a proud, triumphant smile spreads across her lips.

"FBI! It's over!" Jack calls out, aiming his gun at her. "Turn yourselves in immediately!"

"Oh, it's hardly over. Now, Chris!" she exclaims as her harpy eagle spreads his wings excitedly.

Jack keeps his sight trained on the woman, but Will turns to see that the boy - Chris - has a gun tucked into the waist of his pants that Will didn't notice before.

The boy has his right hand hovering over the handle.

“Don’t do it, kid,” Beverly warns him, her own gun drawn but not pointed at him.

Chris grabs the handle and flings the gun away. Will winces, expecting it to fire on impact, but it just skids harmlessly against the ground.

“I don't- I don't wanna do this anymore! I don't wanna end up like Conner,” Chris says, sobbing. “I wanna go home!”

“We *will* go home, sweetie,” WitchWay says, panic starting to rise in her voice. “As soon as your brother-”

“My REAL home!” Chris cries. His tears fall to the thirsty ground, immediately absorbed. “He's not my brother, and you're not my mom!”

All of the warmth leaves the woman's face, leaving behind only cold, hard disappointment. “I had thought Conner would be a good lesson for you,” she says tightly. “Clearly, I was wrong. Jesse-”

But before she can say anything more, Jesse looks out toward C.J., then silently removes a gun from his waistband and shoots WitchWay the thigh. She and her eagle screech in pain and betrayal as she crumples to the ground.

Jesse kneels on the cold ground, sets the gun aside, and puts his arms up behind his head in surrender. Silent tears are streaming down his face.

As WitchWay wails, Will notices that in the tension of the standoff, he lost track of C.J.’s daemon. The flying squirrel is gone, and C.J. lies completely motionless out in the salt flat. His fingers are frozen in a desperate clawing motion against the earth, and his chest does not rise.

A few hours later, once WitchWay (aka Eva Adler, the great-granddaughter of a man born to a German Witch, and overly preoccupied with a fantasy of reclaiming that heritage), Jesse Turner, and Chris O'Halloran are in custody, the sun starts to rise over Death Valley. The purples of night melt into inviting pinks, oranges, and yellows that Will knows are fleeting and will soon be replaced by a glaring reprise of yesterday's heat and the endless, cloudless blue of day.

Will excuses himself from the debate Jack and the rangers are having about how to recover C.J.’s body. Apparently the nearest clan of Witches are not at all on friendly terms with the rangers and are unlikely to help retrieve the body. A few humans ignore the perimeter's warnings every year and expire on the salt flats, and the local Witches are tired of cleaning up

humanity's messes. Most are left to be absorbed into the land, to provide nourishment to the creatures who can thrive in a place where humans can't.

But C.J.'s family is still alive. They wouldn't be if C.J. had survived the ritual and went on to "reunite" with them the same way Jesse reunited with the Turners and Conner with the Frists, but they don't know that. From their perspective, their poor boy had been brainwashed by a small-time cult leader, kidnapped, and killed. They will certainly want the body back.

As he waits by the rental car, Will's phone buzzes with a received text message.

It's from Hannibal. Three simple words:

Abigail is awake.

Interlude: 生き甲斐

Chapter Summary

New month new chapter! Well, new flashback interlude anyway. Notes for the last chapter are here for those who wish to read them!

After this interlude, we'll be going back to the present with the next chapter, A Business.

Comments and kudos are very welcome, and you can also hit me up on Twitter! Thank you so much for reading!

生き甲斐 (Ikigai): something that gives meaning to one's life; one's truest purpose

HOKKAIDO, JAPAN - AUGUST

“Wake up,” Aušrinė whispers into his ear, just loud enough to be heard over the quiet rumble of the train. “We're almost there.”

If I were asleep, you would be as well, Aušrinė, Hannibal replies through their Tether, cracking open his eyes.

Aušrinė, who had perched on the metal bar between the train seat and the window, ruffles her feathers. Some might see the expression as a shiver of anxiety, but Hannibal knows the true feeling behind the movement. Excitement. Exhilaration.

“Perhaps not for much longer,” she murmurs.

Their train car is empty except for themselves and a group of four middle school-aged boys who had clambered in a few stops back. Their duffle bags, baseball mitts, and bats sit haphazardly beneath the seat, all in danger of spilling out with every gentle bump as the train glides down the tracks. One sits with his stag beetle daemon perched on the rim of his cap as he plays a handheld video game system. The other three and their daemons huddle around him, offering unsolicited advice.

A cheerful chime sounds out from the train's speaker. A friendly recorded female voice calls out, “The next stop is Noboribetsu! Noboribetsu!” After that, the chime sounds again.

Aušrinė flutters to Hannibal's shoulder as he stands to pull his luggage from the upper railing. Behind him, he hears the boys readying themselves to depart as well.

Once the train slows to a stop, Hannibal steps out into Noboribetsu Station. It's a speck compared to some of the stations he has gone through in both Tokyo and various bustling cities in Europe, but it has a rustic charm. He suspects it will become quite busy over the next

few days given the many posters advertising the city's popular Hell Festival that's being held that weekend.

The air outside is pleasantly warm and breezy, and the air smells strongly of salt from the coast only a kilometer away. Seagulls perch on whatever surface will have them or fly in lazy wheels overhead, chattering and eager for whatever scraps they can sneak from the station's trash and recycling receptacles.

Just outside the station, there is a bus preparing to depart north to the onsen town area of the city. He climbs in and takes a seat, receiving a few curious looks from locals who rarely see westerners.

It takes the bus about fifteen minutes to drive up the winding roads into the foothills of the volcanic mountains. The view is beautiful, with lush, green trees covering the gently rolling hills as the coastal scenery gradually gives way to fertile volcanic soil.

When the bus stops at the onsen town terminal, Hannibal and Aušrinė check their map and proceed toward the traditional-style inn where they will be staying. The main street is bustling with souvenir shops decorating their storefronts for the festival, temporary food stalls setting up their booths, and volunteers flitting from stop to stop to make sure everything is on schedule. He passes a group of high school girls practicing their dance for the parade that will wind through the town. Their daemons all fly over their heads in the forms of colorful tropical birds, twirling around each other as part of the choreography.

Finally, they arrive at a stately building constructed out of dark old wood. Like everything else in the area, it has been decorated in honor of the coming festival. A banner is strung up beneath the eaves, and Hannibal recognizes the intricate design of its textiles as being of Ainu design. There is also a large wooden mural of an oni preparing to step into a hot spring positioned at the entrance. Hannibal finds himself pausing to observe the exquisite handiwork.

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When he enters, a metal chime rings above the door. “*Irasshaimase!*” calls a pleasant female voice. “I'll be with you in just a moment!”

As Hannibal and Aušrinė wait at the check-in desk, they take in their surroundings. To the left of the desk is a corridor that leads to the rooms. To the right, there is a lounge with low tables and cushions for communal meals, drinks, and other social activities. A TV sits in the corner of the lounge with a little girl of around five kneeling in front of it, glued to the animated series playing on the screen. Her daemon is currently in the form of a fluffy white rabbit, mimicking the daemon of the show's magical heroine.

“Please excuse me for the wait,” says an Omega woman as she hurries from a room in the hallway carrying a tall stack of freshly laundered and folded towels. Her pug daemon trots behind her, his curly tail bouncing jovially. She sets the towels down on the desk and turns her attention to Hannibal.

She looks to be in her mid-to-late 30s, and a few strands of dark hair are falling loose from the messy bun at the top of her head. Her smile is kind and a little tired, but there is a small glimmer of apprehension in her eyes.

“You must be Mr. Pazzi,” she says in English, her words slightly halting with lack of practice. “Thank you for visiting our ryokan. My name is Shimamura Kiyoko, and this is my daemon Daisuke. I'm sorry my English is a little slow…”

“It's no trouble,” Hannibal says in Japanese. “I speak a little Japanese if that would be easier. English isn't my native language either, after all. Yes, I'm Rinaldo Pazzi, and this is my daemon, Venus.”

The woman visibly relaxes and her smile lights up with relief. “According to your reservation, you're visiting from Italy. Which part?”

“Florence.”

“Ah, how wonderful! My family visited Italy last year, and Florence was my favorite city! Such beautiful architecture and classical art…”

“And pizza margherita!” exclaims the little girl, who had crept over silently after her program ended. She grins widely, several gaps from lost baby teeth prominently displayed in her smile.

Kiyoko startles and gives her daughter an expression that Hannibal finds to be the exact midpoint between amusement and frustration. “Honestly, Mischa,” she mutters as the little girl bounces up and down, repeating her two favorite Italian words.

Hannibal freezes.

Kiyoko kneels down and gives the child a patient smile. “Mika, why don't you go out to the workshop and see if Mama needs any help getting her carvings ready to sell at the festival?”

Mika, Aušrinė thinks, her voice soft. *Not*...

Not, Hannibal agrees stiffly.

“Okay!” the little girl says, hopping out the entrance alongside her daemon. With every hop she chants, “Pizza margherita!”

“I'm sorry about that,” Kiyoko says, standing up and sheepishly tucking some of her stray hair behind her ear. “My daughter is at a very energetic age.”

“Ms. Shimamura, there’s no reason to apologize for raising a happy and spirited child.”

Kiyoko smiles, but slight concern tugs at her lips. “Is something wrong, Mr. Pazzi? You've grown rather pale.”

“Just jetlag,” Hannibal lies, waving off her concern. “Nothing a little rest won't fix.”

“Ah, in that case, let's get you to your room. Let me get you some slippers and we can be on our way.”

Kiyoko leads him down the corridor, past a few other rooms where he can hear the muffled voices of other guests chatting. On the way, she gives him a rundown of what he will need to know while staying at the ryokan: that there are two onsen baths, one for Alphas and Beta men and one for Omegas and Beta women, what time meals are served, how to dress in the ryokan and bathing areas. The inn seems very hospitable and beautiful, and Hannibal regrets that he will likely not be spending much time here. He makes a mental note that, if he survives his upcoming ordeal, he must come back here for a less unorthodox stay.

His room is very traditional, with tatami flooring and a wardrobe with clean yukata and a storage cabinet where the futon and other bedding materials are kept when not in use.

“Are you here for the festival?” Kiyoko asks as she finishes showing Hannibal the room.

“Yes, but I'm also planning on doing some hiking. It's a very beautiful area.”

Kiyoko goes quiet for a moment, and her pug daemon's ever-wagging tail goes still. She looks like she is deliberating on whether or not to tell him something, and Hannibal can guess exactly what it is.

“Your spoken Japanese is very strong,” she says. “Are you able to read much of it as well?”

“For the most part. Sometimes I have to look up words that contain unusual or highly technical kanji. I'm carrying around a translation dictionary just in case.”

“Good,” Kiyoko says, her voice still hesitant. “That's good. You're right that this is a very beautiful area, but that beauty can mask danger. If you see any warning signs up in the mountains, you must obey them. I don't want to sound like a nagging old woman, but young Alphas can sometimes be a little…”

“Foolhardy? Arrogant?” Hannibal asks, obviously amused.

“Your words, not mine.”

“Well, rest assured, Ms. Shimamura. Unlike most Alphas my age, I don't think I'm immortal or impervious. I'm very aware of my own limitations.”

This seems to quell Kiyoko's hesitancy, and with a few friendly words of parting, she leaves Hannibal to rest.

As soon as she's gone, Aušrinė flies to the far end of the wide room. They've been working on stretching their Tether for over a year in preparation for tomorrow, and what had previously been a standard Tether length of about 3 yards has doubled to around 6. For hours every day, Hannibal and Aušrinė have willingly endured the soul-deep burn and tear of a Tether pulled tight.

Once Aušrinė is up against the far wall, Hannibal takes in a deep breath and steps towards the opposite wall. Each step is like a thousand needles to the heart, but he endures in silence. It is a pain born of growth, like muscles aching after a strength training session. The reward will be worth this and whatever torments await him in the land where Aušrinė cannot follow.

He reaches the opposite wall and turns to face his wonderful, ambitious raven. Twenty feet separate them.

“Only those who know their limitations,” Aušrinė says, her voice rough with the strain of the pulled Tether, “can surpass them.”

“And we will,” they say together, a pledge they have shared countless times since Aušrinė first suggested this path.

*****

When trying to slip into a forbidden area, be it as common as the home of a rude banker or as unusual as one of the few places on Earth where daemons cannot tread, it would be easy to assume that the best time to do so would be when there are as few witnesses as possible. But this is not strictly true. If someone sneaks around at an unusual time and there is a witness, they are much more likely to think something is amiss and remember. But if there are many people and a great deal of excitement, then the memories have a higher chance of being muddled.

This is why Hannibal is going to walk past hundreds and hundreds of festival attendees and out into the forbidden area nearby. Being an obvious foreigner, he won’t have quite as easy a time blending in as he would in Europe, but plenty of westerners visit Noboribetsu for the festival and famous hot springs, so he shouldn't be too conspicuous.

It’s a couple of hours before dusk the day after his arrival in Noboribetsu, and the first day of the Hell Festival is in full swing. The main street is crowded with tourists and locals alike, all bustling from stall to stall. As Hannibal and Aušrinė make their way through the crowd, they hear a familiar young voice shout, “Over here, Mr. Pizza Margherita!”

Hannibal turns toward the voice and sees Mika waving at him from where she is perched sitting atop the shoulders of an Alpha woman with strong back and arm muscles. The Alpha's daemon, a stoic-looking Akita dog, sits patiently by the side of the booth while Mika's daemon, mimicking his parent's form as a pudgy Akita puppy, rolls around playfully and nips at his paws. They're behind a table that is covered in beautiful wood carvings, ranging from cute recreations of popular children's characters all the way to bear statues and patterned trays carved in traditional Ainu style.

As he approaches them, he sees Kiyoko and Daisuke joining their family. She is carrying a plastic container with yakitori skewers from a nearby food stall.

“Ah, Mr. Pazzi!” Kiyoko says. “Are you enjoying the festival?”

“Yes, it's very interesting,” Hannibal says, admiring the carvings. He looks up to Kiyoko's mate. “I'm Rinaldo Pazzi, and my daemon, Venus. Your art is exquisite.”

“Shimamura Haruka and Shiramba,” she says as Mika snacks on one of the yakitori skewers above her head. For someone who could easily end up with marinated meat in her hair, she's remarkably composed. “Thank you.”

One piece in particular catches Hannibal's eye. It's a dark statue of a bear catching a fish midstream. The creature's fangs and claws nearly gleam in the afternoon's fading sunlight, and the sense of motion captured despite the stillness of its mighty paws is stunning.

"I'd love to purchase this, but I'd rather not carry it around all night. Could I pay for it now and pick it up later?" he asks.

"Of course," Haruka says. "I've made similar arrangements with about a dozen people who have bought some of my larger works. They're going to pick them up tonight after the fireworks show. Does that work for you too?"

"Actually, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, would it be possible to put it in the room I'm staying in? I may not be back to the ryokan until quite late."

"Ah, youth," Kiyoko sighs, giving a knowing smile. "Yes, we can do that for you. Just stay out of trouble!"

Hannibal pays Haruka 35,000 yen for the statue, bids farewell to the family, and continues his slow, deliberate path towards something far, far more dangerous than mere trouble.

*****

The sun has just sunk beneath the hills by the time Hannibal and Aušrinė find the first sign.

Just as Kiyoko said, the sign warns that the land beyond is hazardous due to volcanic pressure, landslide risks, and the presence of dangerous wildlife like bears. It says nothing about the risk of death due to daemon separation.

They push onward past the warning.

The first star has begun to shine overhead when they reach the second sign. This one is much more succinct: "WITCHES ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT."

They continue on. Far away, he hears the music from the parade winding through the hills.

He can hear the distant rumble and pops of the fireworks display when they arrive at the final warning. This time it isn't a wooden sign but an ancient, weathered slab of stone. A human shape is carved into the top of the slab with an animal that resembles a fox next to it. But then, Hannibal realizes, it isn't an animal at all but a daemon. A horrible gash is cut through the fox's body. Even without written language, the message is clear - "Here daemons die." A warning that has survived countless generations, carved by a person who likely lived and died thousands of years before Hannibal was even born.

The moon is bright enough that Hannibal can clearly see down the tall hill where the stone is set to the terrain that extends out beyond the invisible boundary. Steam rises from the ground due to underground volcanic vents, and the ground is rocky. It's a shocking change from the very lush late-summer foliage leading up to the forbidden area. It's as if a foreign planet has tried to invade and spread like a hostile virus.

“Jigokudani,” Aušrinė breathes, and Hannibal can feel the excitement humming across their Tether like an electrical charge. “Hell Valley.”

For a moment, Hannibal ponders what final words he may wish to say to his daemon if things go poorly. He could utter some trite words about the nature of risk and freedom, or the price tag that comes with ambition. But they all die on his tongue, and all he can taste is the odd quality of the air.

So, he steps forward.

His first movement into Jigokudani is the purest agony he has ever felt, and neither fate nor his own will have kept him free from pain. As an Alpha, he will never know personally what it's like to give birth, but he imagines that this sensation must be roughly similar. Instead of his lower body, however, the pain is radiating primarily from his chest. It's as if some invisible force has grabbed his ribs and cracked them open, but on a level somehow deeper than that of his bones and blood and sinew.

He almost falls to his knees, but he refuses, gritting his teeth so hard he wonders if his molars might crack. Despite it all, he forces his feet to keep moving. He doesn’t know when he bites the inside of his cheek to try to distract himself from the pain of the ripping Tether; he just knows that at some point his mouth is filled with the familiar taste of copper.

He remembers the night he had finally wrung the truth about the ritual from Murasaki. How her dark eyes changed when it became clear that there was no convincing Hannibal to give up on the idea. “Do you know why so many humans fail the test?” she had asked, and even now her words ring in Hannibal's ear as if she were really there with him in the first steps into Hell.

“The ones who fail linger. They resist the parting, be it by fear or sentimentality. Witches always have birds,” she had said. “And a bird's first instinct is to fly free.”

It's then that Hannibal realizes he has been so preoccupied with the pain that he has missed that he can no longer feel Aušrinė through their Tether. For the first time in his life, he has no access to her thoughts or her feelings. He presumes the same goes for her. More than the pain wracking his body, this is the one thing that nearly makes him turn around. But he heeds Murasaki's advice and holds steady, forcing himself onward. He is having a hard time measuring distance, but he must be well beyond his and Aušrinė’s furthest Tethered distance.

Now that the initial shock of the pain is wearing off and his ears are no longer filled with only the rush of his own blood in his head, he can hear again. In the distance behind him, he catches the distressed rustling of feathers - Aušrinė going through her own side of the ordeal. But, just as he has begun to acclimate to the torture, so has she.

With one final grotesque and stinging tug, Hannibal feels the Tether snap. For just a moment, his heart skips a beat, and he wonders if Aušrinė is dissipating into Dust behind him and this is his final moment of awareness before death. But then he hears the flurry of flapping wings, and he knows Aušrinė is alive and soaring away as fast as her wings will take her.

Now that the Tether is gone, he too feels an instinctual pull. The ritual is not yet complete, and he knows if he turns around and seeks Aušrinė they will fail. He finds himself drawn further into Jigokudani, seeking something that he cannot name. The thought of an insect infected with cordyceps fungus springs to mind; how the ailing, dying ant seeks a spot high above her colony so the fruiting body of the fungus can erupt from her head and spread itself down upon her countless sisters.

He puts that thought aside as he trudges on toward the source of the pull. Now that the Tether has snapped, the pain has subsided from the sharp ripping at his heart to a dull, lingering full-body ache. It's manageable if he has a goal to focus on, and luckily that is exactly what he has.

The ground crunches beneath his shoes as he continues on. Sweat and the steam from the volcanic vents make his hair and clothing soaked, and although the summer night is still comfortably warm, his skin prickles with chill when the wind blows against his back.

The pull draws him toward a steep and craggy hill. By the time he climbs to its peak, his palms are scuffed raw and bloody. At the top, he sees what has been drawing him deeper and deeper into Jigokudani: a stunning caldera lake that is almost perfectly circular. The water is placid and reflects the glow of the moon and countless stars like the flawless surface of an antique mirror.

Unlike the inhospitable gravel and steam-dominated landscape of the valley, the inside of the caldera is startlingly lush. He kneels down and runs his fingers beneath the tightly curled frond of a fern that he has never seen in any botanical text. That in itself is not too surprising, given how long the plants and animals here must have thrived cut off from human interference. The fern reacts to the warmth of his touch, unfurling and moving its pinnae as if seeking out more of the touch. Almost as if it were aware.

If only he had his sketchbooks and materials, he would recreate this entire place in charcoals and pencil. It would fail to capture the strange energy in the air, but even a pale imitation of this place would be ethereally beautiful. He vows to recreate it in his memory palace, if the magic of the area allows such a thing.

He stands and moves toward the lake, thankful that the slope down is gentler than the climb up had been. Once he reaches the edge of the water, he strips all of his clothes off and sets them atop a large stone nearby.

The water is shockingly clear, so much so that he only loses sight of the bottom due to depth, not the presence of silt and other debris. As he looks deeper, he can see small fish gleaming with soft blue bioluminescence flashing unknown messages to each other.

The water is cool against his bare skin, rippling gently as he swims toward the center of the lake. When he arrives at the center, he relaxes and floats. His eyes close, though he does not sleep. He isn't sure how long he floats there, seeing nothing but darkness, hearing nothing but the splash of the water in his ears, and feeling nothing but the air on his chest.

He opens his eyes, and the night sky is alive with movement. A cloud passes over the moon, blotting out its light. And yet, he can still see the soft glimmering of the unfamiliar stars and

the vast darkness between them. The darkness contorts and writhes, an ever-changing shape. Like an inkblot test, he occasionally catches familiar-looking protrusions in the chaotic mass - a bird's wing, an antler, a claw - but they change quickly and lack any context for him to understand what he is seeing.

For a brief, overwhelmed moment, he wonders if this thing writhing in the sky is God himself.

But then, he blinks, and the vision fades. He still doesn't know what it was, nor can he even begin to guess. And yet, the sight is seared into his heart, and he feels utterly changed by seeing it. This, he thinks, is the feeling that drives the spiritual to prosephy.

He swims back to shore. With nothing to dry himself, he simply waits for the air to dry him to a point where he can feel comfortable getting dressed. As he waits, he realizes that the scrapes that had covered his hands from the climb are completely healed. His muscles are also no longer sore from the journey. Even the lingering ache from his split with his daemon is changed, feeling more strange and sensitive than objectively painful. The feeling is something like that of a gum before a new tooth erupts.

By the time he has dried and dressed, the night is starting to wane. There is still an hour or two before sunrise, but that means it will easily be daylight by the time he's back in the lands where daemons can dwell. He sets out back in the direction he came from.

At the top of the caldera, he hears something that had not been there earlier. Two female voices call out in surprise in the distance. He looks out in the direction of the sound and, now that dawn is starting to peak out over the mountains, he can see two Witches flying toward him.

The Witches descend several yards away from him, and they regard him with looks of skepticism. One has long, freely-flowing hair and the other has hers cut in a short, choppy style. They both look young, but with the way Witches are, they could just as easily be anywhere from three to three hundred years after their settling. The long-haired Witch has the corpse of a large, two-tailed catlike creature under her left arm. Recalling the ghost and monster stories he has heard Murasaki tell to Chiyoh, it must be a nekomata.

The short-haired Witch says something to her companion in a language that Hannibal doesn’t recognize. It's phonetically similar to Japanese, but Hannibal recognizes none of the words.

The other Witch hisses something dismissive-sounding in response. Louder, she addresses Hannibal in Japanese, “How do you know of this place, human?”

“Murasaki, a former Witch of the Lake Toya clan, told me about it.”

The Witches exchange a confused look that gradually transforms first into realization, then rage, and finally into disdain.

“Murasaki, huh?” scoffs the short-haired Witch. “Is that what the murderer is calling herself these days?”

“Murderer?” Hannibal asks, intrigued. “Could you tell me more?”

“She killed my mother and her baby. Ask the traitor yourself about it, though you'd do well to regard her lies with suspicion,” says the long-haired Witch. Furious, she spits on the ground as tears gather in her eyes. “I should kill you where you stand just for knowing her!”

The short-haired Witch reaches out and holds her clanmate back. She murmurs something in the unfamiliar language that drains some of the fight out of her associate. In her right hand, the short-haired Witch holds a branch that is covered in delicate, fresh cherry blossoms despite the fact that such flowers are nearly half a year out of season. Using the branch, she points off away from the caldera. “By surviving the separation, you have earned a warning. But if you are still in this territory by the time the sun is high, or if you ever step foot here again, we will kill you.”

Although he would love to try to extract more information from the Witches, Hannibal knows that technically speaking he is the rude party here. He is trespassing after all, at least according to the warning signs. He obeys their instruction and heads back toward where he first entered this strange land. The whole time, he feels the Witches following and observing him, even if they are nowhere to be seen when he turns around.

He hesitates briefly at the spot where the greenery of the normal world gives way to Jigokudani. The bright morning sun is just starting to burn away the lingering pinks and purples of dawn, and he knows that soon his complete lack of sleep will catch up with him.

The moment he steps out of the strange territory, he feels the lingering ache from where his Tether had snapped fade away. In its place, he feels a soft warmth start to spread through him. In a matter of moments, that warmth intensifies, and he feels a quick, painless jolt as he suddenly realizes he can feel Aušrinė again.

Their old Tether is gone, but it has been replaced by something far greater. Now that he has been baptized into this new strength, he can see that the old Tether had been as weak and limited as a tiny length of twine. This new Tether, in contrast, is like a steel-reinforced cable long enough to plunge into the furthest depths of the ocean. They are still connected, but they are boundless.

His daemon is well over a dozen kilometers away on a small, craggy island off the coast, standing on the broken neck of a dead man. He must have slipped and fallen in such a way that his neck and skull cracked on the rocks. Beside him, a large bag of sea cucumbers lies spilling back into the water. A poacher.

Daemons don’t need to eat, as they are sustained by their human. That said, they can eat - or, to be more accurate, they can consume. Being made of solidified Dust, they have no digestive systems to process the food into vital nutrients, no blood and bone to replenish with those nutrients, and no means of expelling waste. Nobody is sure what happens to the matter consumed by daemons, and there is no plausible way to find out. Surely countless unethical scientists and unorthodox theologians must have tried and failed across the ages.

As a result, most people find the idea of daemons eating rather unsettling and uncanny. Taboo.

But Hannibal is far from squeamish where taboos are concerned, so the only thing he feels when Aušrinė plucks out the dead man's left eye with her powerful beak is a sense of personal satisfaction.

Despite their profound reconnection, Hannibal cannot recall anything that happened over the night from Aušrinė's perspective. It's just an odd, tantalizing blank. He presumes it must be the same for her, as he senses her gently probing around his memories of Jigokudani but unable to find them.

It seems we both have our own secrets now, Hannibal thinks.

Wonderful, isn't it? Aušrinė replies as she plucks out the poacher's other eye and spreads her wings to fly, far and high and truly free.

It's mid-morning by the time Aušrinė finishes flying back to join Hannibal as he heads down the hills towards Noboribetsu. When he arrives back at the ryokan, he successfully convinces a very amused Kiyoko that he is profoundly hungover and sleepless after a very wild night.

Once he's back in his room, he barely has time to register the presence of the bear statue before he is drifting off to sleep. And, simply because she now can, Aušrinė stays awake for an hour longer before joining him.

PARIS, FRANCE - SEPTEMBER

A week later, now fully rested up from their ordeal and having travelled all across Japan, Hannibal and Aušrinė return to his late uncle's estate in France. His aunt is not there to greet him, but her fifteen year old ward is. The girl eyes him suspiciously as he heads through the gate. Fukuda, her daemon, flits about her head in the form of a large, glimmering dragonfly.

"Did it work?" she asks once he is in earshot.

Aušrinė swoops from Hannibal's shoulder and flies all the way up to perch on the roof's parapet high above.

"Quite well, I think," Hannibal says.

Chiyoh casts her eyes down from where Aušrinė is preening herself three stories up to meet Hannibal's eyes. "Hm," she murmurs as she turns back toward the entrance, leading Hannibal inside.

"Where is Murasaki?" he asks as they step into the estate's opulent foyer.

"Out buying spider lilies to plant on Robertus' grave. She may come home with more than necessary. We weren't sure if you'd be back in a body bag."

She watches him as he opens his luggage and takes out a large, carefully wrapped object. He removes two layers of cloth and bubble wrapping, revealing the bear statue.

“A gift from Hokkaido, not far from Lake Toya,” Hannibal says as he hands the statue to the girl.

Something pained quickly flitters across Chiyoh's face before she schools her expression back into a careful and deliberate mask. “I know just where to put it,” she says.

Hannibal follows her down the first floor corridor until she stops at an empty pedestal where he recalls a rare orchid once resided. Chiyoh places the statue on the pedestal and stares at it as the dark orange evening sun washes over it from a nearby window.

“Do you resent Murasaki for keeping you from your kind?” Hannibal asks the slim, serious girl beside him.

Chiyoh is silent for a long time, so long that Hannibal thinks she is refusing to answer. Just as Hannibal has given up on getting a response out of her, Chiyoh speaks. “It's an even trade. One cage for another.”

Hannibal looks at her curiously, urging her wordlessly to continue.

“At least in this cage I'm not judged for circumstances outside my control. It's rare for Witches to die in childbirth,” Chiyoh says. “My mother did.”

“And they blamed you for it?”

“I was only a day old when Murasaki became an apostate and took me with her out into the world. She told me our clanmates rejected me, and their neglect of me is partly what inspired her to leave. I have no reason to disbelieve her.”

Hannibal isn't so sure about that anymore.

Murasaki and her green pheasant daemon Fujiwara return a little more than an hour later. Just as Chiyoh said, she comes bearing a large number of bright red spider lilies. When she sees that Hannibal and Aušrinė have survived the ritual, a strange, haunted expression sinks in to her beautiful black eyes. There is relief there, but also nostalgia and bitterness.

Hannibal insists on cooking, and the three of them eat in the estate's cavernous dining room. The conversation is light and consists mostly of Murasaki asking Hannibal about his travels. She says nothing of the ritual, Jigokudani, or Witches. Hannibal knows these things will come later.

They all part ways after dinner. Aušrinė, still relishing the novelty of distance, flies out into the night to skulk around the city. Hannibal takes care of cleaning up from dinner, and Chiyoh lingers for a little while. He can tell that she is debating whether or not to ask him about the ritual and the clan she left as an infant, but she never does. Eventually she drifts away, so silently that Hannibal barely notices.

Once Chiyoh has gone to bed, Hannibal heads for the estate garden where his uncle has been laid to rest. He passes the perfectly shaped hedges and the late summer blooms giving way to

the early autumn flowers. As expected, he finds Murasaki and Fujiwara by his uncle's grave, near the koi pond that Robertus used to prize so dearly. Murasaki's white gown seems to glow ethereally and ghostly in the lamplight.

In the dim light of the garden's decorative lanterns, his aunt-by-marriage is radiantly beautiful. As a Witch, there has always been something mysterious and otherworldly about her. For a long time, he attributed that mystery to the fact that all of her kind are neither Alpha, Beta, nor Omega, possessing some qualities of all three dynamics. But now that Hannibal has felt the things he has felt and seen the things he has seen in Jigokudani, some of her mystery is more understandable.

But something has changed, and he isn't sure if it's he or she who has done the changing. A week ago, before he left Japan, he thought he was in love with her. Hearing the implication that she may be a killer from her estranged clanmates should have only increased his romantic fervor, and he finds it odd that it hasn't. He's still fond of her, but those specific feelings are gone, seemingly washed away in his unorthodox baptism.

"It's rude to stare without announcing yourself," Murasaki says quietly, her back still turned to him.

"My apologies," Hannibal says. "I was lost in thought."

Murasaki stands and turns to face him. She looks at him for a long moment, appraising him carefully. She says nothing.

"Your name isn't actually Murasaki, is it," Hannibal says. It isn't really a question.

"No, it's not," she says. Her pheasant daemon flies up to perch on her shoulder, and his iridescent plumage glimmers in the lamplight. "Nor is Fujiwara my daemon's real name."

"I always thought it was strange that you shared the same name as the author of *Genji Monogatari*," he says. "Given your lifespan, I'll admit that for a time I wondered if you were one and the same. Are you willing to tell me your real name?"

"It isn't mine to give. For Witches, names have incredible power. I left it behind when I turned my back on my clan."

"Ah, that reminds me," Hannibal says. "While I was in Jigokudani, a couple of your former clanmates discovered me."

"Oh?"

"They told me that you killed a clanmate and her baby. Which is strange, since this very evening Chiyoh told me that her mother died in childbirth and you took her with you when you left so she would avoid rejection from the clan."

Murasaki stands so still and silent that she seems more like a statue than a creature of flesh and blood. For a moment, the only movement of her body is the slow, tight rise of the corners of her red lips. "Do you know how many children I've given birth to, Hannibal?" she asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. “A few, I would imagine.”

“Forty-eight,” she says. “Roughly one child every decade until twenty years ago. For Witches, hardly a wait at all between births. Every last one of them was a boy.”

“You must have countless descendants all across Japan.”

“All ephemeral, doomed to die centuries before I will. Hardly as much of a legacy as having a Witchling,” she says. Her brows furrow, and that red smile becomes just a bit more brittle. “So when I was on midwife duty and my charge gave birth to her second daughter only thirty years after her first… in my grief and jealousy, I may have mistaken the healing herbs and gave her something that would keep her blood from clotting. I left her my name as she died, and with it, a large portion of my power. Not quite an even trade for such a sad oversight, but the most I could do.”

“And you left with her baby. With Chiyoh.”

“A small light of joy after such tragedy,” Murasaki murmurs. “But you should know more than most about that type of silver lining.”

Hannibal says nothing, merely cocking his head in curiosity about what she is implying.

“You still had your precious sister after the death of your parents, after all,” she says. She shakes her head. “Both of them in the same car accident, and only a few weeks before they were going to send you to the boarding school your father attended until you came of age. What a shock that their brakes failed in such a new car.”

Hannibal smiles, and there is an equal amount of amusement and sharpness on his lips. With a sudden rush of wings, and perhaps summoned by Murasaki mentioning Mischa, Aušrinė flies out of the dark night and alights on Robertus’ tombstone. Murasaki doesn't wince at the surprise.

“Aušrinė and I are returning to Florence tomorrow. Now that we can separate ourselves, we can cover much more ground on our… unfinished business.”

“And after that?”

“Once we finish our studies, we are probably going to move to the United States.”

“Why?” Murasaki asks, narrowing her eyes as if Hannibal has told her he will be moving into a pigsty. “That alleged country is younger than I am by several centuries. Unless you plan on joining one of the Witch clans or indigenous peoples, there's no history there.”

“I'm not sure. Just a feeling. It's similar to what drew me to the heart of Jigokudani. Like I may find something splendid there if I follow it. Something utterly unparalleled.”

Murasaki tilts her chin up slightly. Even now, with so many secrets out, she exudes pride that spans the centuries. “So you have no intention on continuing your uncle's legacy.”

“Not all of us are motivated by perpetuating the half-imaginary noble past into the unpredictable future. I want to make my own impression on the world, not merely sustain the design created by my forebears.”

Murasaki shakes her head in disappointment but does not try to sway him. “Such a waste,” she sighs. “Good night, Hannibal.”

“Good night, Murasaki.”

Aušrinė flies ahead of him, swooping out of the garden toward the manor. When he turns to follow, Murasaki stops him with a final question.

“Are you going to tell Chiyoh?”

“No,” Hannibal says as a cool early September breeze sweeps through the night. Some of the leaves that have already begun to die on the trees rattle in the wind. “She’s a smart girl. I expect she'll figure it out some day. When that day comes, I'm curious what she'll choose to do about it.”

He leaves her behind, continuing on into the night.

FLORENCE, ITALY - APRIL

The sound of his apartment's buzzer is loud enough to be heard even over the panicked, muffled cries of the creatures caged up before him. In the larger but still woefully insufficient cage, an Alpha man in his early middle age lies bound and gagged. His eyes are wide and wild, brimming with tears that are either terrified or furious. Perhaps both. Imprisoned in a tiny birdcage situated just far enough from the man to cause terrible pain through the Tether, his Norwegian rat daemon cowers as far as she can get from Hannibal.

It's been less than a day since Hannibal and Aušrinė finally caught their prey after months of tracking, scouting, and planning. Now that the he has the ringleader from that horrible, fateful night, Hannibal needs to figure out what to do with him. Death would be too kind.

The buzzer goes off again, and he sweeps a heavy sheet over the cage. His prisoner tries to beg around the gag in his mouth, and whimpers when he is plunged into darkness.

As Hannibal heads upstairs to answer the door, Aušrinė stays behind to whisper dark promises to the man who gave their life a grim purpose by all those years ago.

Halfway through the third buzz, Hannibal opens the door. He is expecting to find a pest that will need to be disposed of, perhaps a salesperson or census taker, but what he finds at his door is a surprise.

Chiyoh stands at the door, a large bag slung over her thin shoulder. She grips the strap across her chest with white-knuckle strength. Her eyes are downcast, and Hannibal can see dark bags beneath them. Fukuda clings to her dress in the form of a bright red poison arrow frog.

Hannibal steps aside wordlessly, allowing the girl inside.

“I didn't know where to go,” she says, her voice monotone as Hannibal offers her a seat at his table.

“You found out the truth, didn't you.”

Chiyoh looks up, and though she may be tired and stressed, her eyes are as sharp as the edge of a knife. “You knew?” she hisses.

“Only after I came back from Japan.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Would you have believed me? Or would you have seen it as a man you only half-trusted trying to undermine the faith you had in your only caregiver?”

Chiyoh lowers her eyes to the fine, dark wood of Hannibal's table. Her hands curl into tight fists against it.

“I'm not a human,” she says bitterly. “But that thief has seen to it that I'm no Witch either. I was her little doll, stolen and dressed in her image. Placed on a shelf to be admired. But now the shelf has fallen, my ceramic has cracked, and there's no place for me.”

They sit in silence for a moment. Hannibal could encourage her to try to reunify with her clan. That she has an older sister who would likely welcome her with open arms. He could tell her that with such a long lifespan, she could travel the world and see and experience more wonderful things than most could dream to accomplish in one lifetime. He could tell her any number of things that would be good for her.

But he thinks of the cages downstairs. He thinks how Hell deserves a proper jailer.

“I know a place you could go, if you want to hear it,” he says. When he sees her look up and stare at him unblinking, he knows he has her attention. “I'm not sure what Murasaki told you about my past. But I'll tell you about the short life of Mischa Lecter. And then I'll make you an offer.”

And he does. He tells her about Mischa's early childhood. He tells her about the crash that claimed their parents lives. He tells her about the night the men came to the castle. He tells her about what happened after. He doesn't give all the details. He provides just enough to whet her appetite for justice, to entice her into the idea of imprisoning someone who stole children's futures just as her own was stolen.

He shows her the cages downstairs, and she agrees to his plan.

That night, as they prepare for what will hopefully be the final trip to Lithuania he will take in his life, Hannibal sees that Chiyoh has brought the bear statue with her. She sets it out on the table, clearly not intending to take it with her.

There is a bit of dried blood on the bear's head that was not there the last time Hannibal saw it.

A Business

Chapter Notes

> New chapter time! Notes for the interlude chapter can be found here for those who want to read them, as always. If you'd like to see me yell about the writing process and occasionally other things, you can follow me on Twitter @rosenritter42.
>
> The next chapter, A Plagiary, will be up hopefully sometime next month! Thank you all so much for reading!

BREAKFAST

The first day that Abigail is awake, she thinks she's dreaming.

She doesn't actually remember waking up, which certainly doesn't help her disorientation and panic. It's more that she comes into awareness already sitting up, the medical devices attached to her seemingly screaming on her behalf since throat is so dry and aching that she can barely make a sound.

She remembers the doctors and nurses rushing in, adding only more noise and chaos to her world. The whole time, she can only barely sense Melinoë through their Tether.

They must have given her some form of sedative, because things go cloudy again after that. She drifts, timeless and numb.

When that fog recedes, there's an Alpha woman sitting beside her bed. She's very pretty, as is the peacock daemon perched on her chair.

“Good morning, Abigail. Do you remember me?” she asks calmly.

Abigail frowns. During the haze, she vaguely recalls a soft voice and a feminine shape, but the line between dream and reality has been so blurred that it’s hard to tell. It could be this strange woman, or it could just as easily have been a dream about her mother. She swallows, and her throat is still painfully dry.

“Maybe,” she croaks.

The woman looks concerned. “Would you like some water?”

“Yes.”

As she hands Abigail a cup with a straw from a table by the hospital bed, the woman reintroduces herself. “You did seem a little out of it when I introduced myself and Valerian,”

she says, watching keenly as Abigail sucks desperately at the water. “Not too fast. You'll feel sick. If your throat's still dry after, I can get you some ice cubes to suck.”

She takes the empty cup from Abigail. “I'm Alana Bloom. I'm a psychiatrist, and I'm going to be helping you recover from your… situation.”

“‘Situation',” Abigail scoffs. Even after the water, her voice is scratchy and raw. “You mean how my dad killed…”

She halts, almost saying ‘a bunch of girls who looked like me’. Nobody has briefed her on the investigation yet, at least as far as her admittedly patchy memory can tell. From their perspective, an innocent person wouldn't know anything about it. Such a slip would be very suspicious.

Abigail buys time by pretending that her throat has caught with a sudden surge of grief. “How my dad killed my mom and then tried to kill me?”

Alana sighs, and Abigail can see her mentally taking notes. She looks away from the psychiatrist, not wanting to see her scrutiny. She twists her fingers into the thin hospital sheet as she looks out her room's large window. Dawn is just barely starting to break over a large and unfamiliar city so different from her sleepy Midwestern town.

Between her hospital bed and the window, Melinoë lies in a special bed designed for midsize daemons. Her form is currently that of an elk fawn, and misery curdles in Abigail's chest at the thought of her daemon resembling her father's. She tries to send the message to Melinoë that she should change to something - anything - else, but her daemon lays there, unaltered.

“Has anyone talked to you about what happened in Minnesota?”

Alana's words snap Abigail's attention away from her daemon. “Nobody has talked to me about *anything*. I haven't even seen a doctor since I woke up.”

“Abigail,” Alana says quietly, and Abigail recognizes the patronizing tone adults take to brace children for bad news immediately. “Technically you woke up two days ago. I first came in to see you yesterday evening. It's not unusual to be disoriented and have trouble keeping track of time after waking up from an induced coma, especially since you were sedated.”

“Coma?” Abigail murmurs, her brows lowering in concern. She had thought it had only been a day or two. “How long?”

Alana sighs. “Over three weeks.”

Abigail's heart lurches in her chest as Alana continues to speak to her. She can barely hear any of it over the muffled dizziness in her head, and for once she's glad she's in this uncomfortable hospital bed since she's pretty sure her knees would have given out if she had been standing. Almost a month of her life, gone.

As the shock wears off, she finally realizes something. “If I've been unconscious for a few weeks, my aunt and her mate must have had enough time to get to… wherever I am. Where are they? Will I live with them? My grandparents are all dead and my dad didn't have siblings, so…”

She realizes she's babbling and trails off. From the expression on Alana's face, she can tell that she isn't going to like whatever the psychiatrist is about to say.

“Due to the high-profile nature of your father's crimes and the very young age of your cousins, your aunt has decided that…” Alana says, hesitating as she tries to explain the situation as delicately as she can.

“She doesn't want me, right?” Abigail asks, a small, bitter, and brittle smile tugging at the corners of her lips. She reaches up a hand to brush away a tear that is threatening to spill from her eye. “I get it. I wouldn't want to get dragged into this either. My aunt always hated my dad. Thought mom was too good for him. Guess she was right.”

Alana reaches out to gently place her hand on Abigail's, but the girl pulls it away at the last moment to wrap her arms around her body. Alana sighs.

The moment is interrupted when a nurse comes in carrying a breakfast tray, her mouse daemon peeking out timidly from beneath her hair net.

Alana tries to give Abigail an encouraging smile. "I'm going to give you a little time to eat breakfast and collect your thoughts. In about two hours, I'll come back with a few people who will need your help wrapping up your father's case. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like I don't have a choice," Abigail grumbles.

Alana's smile falters. "I'll be back soon," she says. Out of the corner of her eye, Abigail watches the psychiatrist leave, sitting tense and still until the very end of her peacock daemon's tail has trailed out of the room.

Once the nurse leaves as well, Abigail lets out a breath that she didn't even know she was holding. She looks down at the tray set across her lap. Her fingers perch on the edge of the tray, and she has no idea how long they've been trembling.

Her body feels famished but she has no appetite. Lifting the lids of the food containers doesn't help in the slightest. Bland oatmeal, a cup of mixed fruit that's 90% grainy pears and 10% soggy mandarin oranges, scrambled eggs that smell like nothing, dry toast and a pat of foil-wrapped butter. She stirs the oatmeal listlessly, taking a few bites here and there.

Without a clock in the room, she isn't sure how much time has passed. The only clue she has is that dawn outside has burnt away to a bright and sunny morning. As she stares out the window, desperately trying to ignore her daemon's odd behavior, she hears the quiet shuffling of someone entering the room behind her.

When she turns around to look, she sees that it isn't Alana. An Alpha woman with vibrant, curly, copper-colored hair stands by the door which has been left slightly ajar. She carries a

black handbag which rustles for a moment before the furry face of a ferret daemon peeks up and out from inside.

“Are you another psychiatrist?” Abigail asks.

“God no,” she says, grinning. “I’m here to offer you some actual, actionable help.”

“Social worker, then,” Abigail mutters.

“Hm. Closer, but no. My name is Freddie Lounds, and this is my daemon Arsène. Have you heard of my work?”

Abigail squints at her. Now that she has a name, there is a strange familiarity to the woman. “I think I saw you on TV a couple of times,” she says. “Interviewed on things like Dateline. True crime stuff. My mom used to watch that kind of thing.”

Lounds's grin widens. “That's exactly right,” she says.

“So you're here to try to buy my story.”

“You're a smart kid,” Lounds says as she glides over and sits in the chair beside Abigail's bed. “But I wouldn't say something as crude and predatory as ‘buy’. I'd say… polish. You're going to want that story to shine like a diamond.”

Abigail frowns. “Why?”

“Because everyone out there is going to want to know all about the Minnesota Shrike - that's what they're calling your dad, by the way - and you are the key to unlocking that story.”

“There's not much to say,” Abigail says bitterly, looking away.

“I wouldn't be so sure about that,” Lounds says. “Plus, there's the little fact that public opinion is like a garden. You pay attention to it and tend to it, and you have a pretty little corner of the world to be proud of. You ignore it and let it sort itself out, and you have weeds and strangling vines all over the place.”

“So if I don't put my story out there, somebody else will,” Abigail says, turning to face Lounds again.

“Exactly,” Louds says. She taps her index finger against her slim chin, and it's such a calculated bit of body language that Abigail wonders if the Alpha practiced the move in the mirror to get it just right. “And sadly I can guess the kind of story they'll invent right away.”

“What?”

“Oh, they'll say you knew all about it. That you helped dear old dad pick those girls. That you helped him kill them. That you and he were… close. Closer than a father and daughter should be.”

What little color that had returned to Abigail's complexion drains away immediately. For the first time since she woke up, she feels more than just a numb, muffled connection to Melinoë through their Tether. A spike of revulsion stabs through her, and she knows if Melinoë could change form, she'd transform into something dark and poisonous and spitting. But she is stuck as a fawn, just as Abigail is stuck here in this hospital under the long, suspicious shadow of her father.

“That's not true!” she hisses.

“Then I strongly recommend you make that very, very clear,” Lounds says, crossing her slim arms across her chest. “Just keep my offer in mind. I have very competitive rates for my service, and I am nothing if not discreet when I'm in your corner. You need hustle, I'm your gal.”

“And if you aren't in my corner?” Abigail whispers.

Lounds smiles again, somehow wider than ever before as Arsène scurries up her side to drape himself across her shoulders. “Then I'd get really good at pulling weeds, really fast."

The ferret daemon's ears twitch, and he turns his head toward the cracked door. He whispers something into Lounds's ear, and she reaches into her handbag. She pulls out a business card and hands it to Abigail. "Here, put this up the sleeve of your hospital gown."

"Why?"

"You don't get as far in this business as I have without a little guile. Now put my trick up your sleeve."

Abigail eyes the card warily but obliges. Mere seconds afterward, Alana returns with three men behind her. One is a stocky Alpha she has never seen before with a large dog daemon at his heels. Another is an Omega with curly brown hair and no visible daemon. As soon as he sees Lounds, his blue eyes light up with fury. The last is an Alpha in a finely tailored suit. The Omega and final Alpha are both vaguely familiar looking, but the thing that draws her attention the most is the second Alpha's raven daemon.

Seeing the bird sets off an avalanche of thoughts in Abigail's mind. She remembers seeing this specific bird the morning before her family fell apart, acting suspiciously and driven away inside her father's truck. She remembers the Omega bursting into her kitchen after her father had killed her mother. She remembers the bursts of gunfire, the sting of sharp metal as her throat is sliced open, the way her father's body jolts when his daemon dies before he does.

But it can't be the same raven, can it? The Alpha man was nowhere to be seen when her father drove away that morning. The distance should have been enough to kill the man and daemon. He couldn't have been hiding in the bed of the truck, as her father always checked it before leaving for the day. He probably wouldn't have objected to a raven hanging around, but he definitely would have noticed a grown man in his truck.

It had to be a coincidence.

No, Melinoë thinks. It's the first completely clear words Abigail has heard from her daemon since waking up. Abigail turns her head to her daemon's bed to see that Melinoë has finally changed position. Instead of looking out the window, she stares at the raven daemon. *They're the same.*

"You aren't supposed to be in here," Alana says, taking a step forward and glowering at Lounds. "Who gave you access to this room?"

"A lady never kisses and tells," Lounds says. She reaches into her bag and hands Abigail a second business card, giving her a wink. "In case you'd like to reach out-"

The Omega strides forward and snatches the card out of Lounds's hand. He holds it for a moment, clearly pulling himself back from ripping the card apart. Awkwardly, he stuffs the card into the inner pocket of his jacket.

"I'd think carefully about who you decide to trust, Abigail," Lounds says, eyeing the Omega sharply. "I've been very upfront about what I want and what you can expect from me. And when the FBI is going around hiring unstable, dangerous Omegas, can you really trust them? If someone keeps their daemon tucked away all the time, then it's an admission that they have something to hide. In fact, there are rumors that he doesn't even have a daemon-"

"Rumors that you started," the stocky Alpha says, his dog daemon growling at his side. He grabs Lounds by the collar and pivots, escorting her out the door as Arsène chitters furiously on her shoulder. "That's enough out of you. Let's go have a chat, Ms. Lounds."

There's a heavy moment of silence that permeates the room once Lounds is gone. The Omega glares furiously down at his shoes while the Alpha looks at him with an expression that Abigail doesn't have a word for. It is somewhere between curiosity and fondness.

Alana shakes her head. "You should steer clear of Freddie Lounds," she says. "It's a shock her daemon isn't a vulture."

The edge of the first business card digs in slightly against the skin of Abigail's arm. The card stock is slick and cool, and she draws her arms closer to her body to keep it up her sleeve. She doesn't answer Alana.

When it becomes clear that Abigail will not be replying to her, Alana continues, "Abigail, these are the people I told you about. This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Aušrinė and Will Graham and Sabine. They're working with the FBI to help resolve your father's case."

As if to answer the sharp question formulating in Abigail's mind about whether or not "Sabine" is even real, a tiny claw reaches out over the lip of Graham's pocket. The head of an irregularly small chameleon peeks out, rotates her eyes to peer at both Abigail and Melinoë simultaneously, and then ducks back into her hiding space.

"Abigail," Graham begins, his voice hesitant. "We need to know what you remember about what happened in Minnesota."

"I remember that you killed my dad's daemon even though you could have shot him in the shoulder," Abigail snaps back.

Graham goes still, some of the color draining out of his face. Alana's eyes widen, and she looks over to the Omega with a small amount of doubt tugging at her brow.

Lecter steps forward. "If it's any assurance, Abigail, I was there as well when your father was shot. It would have been difficult for you to discern from your position and with the amount of adrenaline in your system, but Will truly had no other choice. He would have hit you while your father used you as a human shield in his cowardice."

Abigail scoffs. "You were there, alright," she mutters. As soon as the words are out, she realizes she may have made a grave mistake. There's something in Lecter's eyes that gives her pause. It might not be wise to have him know that she knows his daemon was there that morning. That perhaps he had something to do with how her father snapped as soon as he got home.

Cover it up, Melinoë whispers through their damaged Tether.

"Lurking in the doorway, hiding behind as an Omega did the dirty work of trying to stop an unsettled girl from being killed by her own father. Some Alpha."

"Abigail!" Alana says reproachfully. Almost immediately after, the anger on her face shifts first into frustration and then concern. No, far worse than concern. Pity. She purses her lips together before turning away to pull Graham and Lecter aside. In a low voice, she says, "I don't think Jack was right about this. She needs more time to adjust to her new circumstances. She's just lashing out from the stress."

The thing that really gets under Abigail's skin and crawls around like a horrible burrowing insect is the fact that she can clearly hear what the psychiatrist is saying. It's just a step above a parent spelling out something undesirable so an illiterate toddler won't know what's coming up. In less than a year, she'll have her 18th birthday and she'll present the same time that Melinoë settles. She's so close to adulthood that the increasingly diminishing reminders that she is currently lesser chafe at her more and more.

Still, an opportunity is an opportunity. She clenches her fist and exclaims, "Of course I'm stressed! I just woke up from a coma, my dad is a murderer, my mom is dead, the FBI wants me to relive all of it, I don't know where I am, and…"

Somewhere along the line, what was supposed to be an attempt to manipulate the adults into giving her some time to plan her next steps has become tainted by the very real fear, doubt, and sorrow clawing at the inside of her skull like a rat trying to escape a cage. Her breaths come faster, turning into gasps and wracking sobs that spill out of her between her words. By the end, her nose is clogged and her eyes are wet from crying. "... and my daemon is *broken!*"

Abigail hides her face in her hands. Soon, tears slip through her fingers. Only a short moment later, she feels a warm hand on her shoulder through her thin and starchy hospital gown.

"Your daemon isn't broken, Abigail," says a heavily accented male voice. It must be Dr. Lecter.

"She can't change," Abigail sobs. "She's stuck. Stuck in the same form as my dad's daemon."

"I can't be completely sure without a more thorough psychological examination, but I suspect you're enduring two daemon conditions seen in unsettled minors who have endured great distress. One is called reflexive traumatic mimicry, or RTM, which occurs when the victim's daemon takes on the form of the adult abuser's daemon. It's believed to be an evolutionary survival tactic to reduce the chance of injury by showing the abuser that you are like them."

Abigail weakly shakes her head. Slowly, her hands slip down from her face. "I'm not like my dad," she insists to the Alpha kneeling beside her.

Hannibal smiles at her. It's supposed to be reassuring, but Abigail can only see the way the fluorescent lights glint off of his raven daemon's dark, unblinking eyes as she perches on his shoulder.

"Exactly," he says. "Like I said, it's an inborn survival strategy. We see mild versions of it every day when the daemons of small children mimic the shape of their parent's daemon, or when teenagers in the same social circle subconsciously match their daemons. It's our species' inherently social and empathetic nature expressing itself."

Behind him, Abigail sees Graham shift his weight to his other foot. There's a distinct level of discomfort in his expression and body language that makes Abigail wonder if sociability and empathy are foreign to him.

Abigail brings her attention back to Lecter. "What's the other condition?" she asks.

"It's called the lock-down response," Lecter says. "It's rarer than RTM. More idiosyncratic, and therefore less thoroughly studied. Harder to predict. Experiencing lock-down is likely a clutch for stability in trying times, or perhaps a physical symptom of being stifled by an unaddressed trauma. The most important thing for you to focus on now is the fact that you are not settled. The trauma did not occur on your birthday, and you have not yet presented as Alpha, Beta, or Omega. Your daemon may be in lock-down, but it will not be permanent. It will get better."

Now that she has a few possible answers, the sheer dread and panic roiling inside of Abigail abates somewhat. Through her damaged Tether, she even feels something from Melinoë that might be a glimmer of hope. It's a welcome reprieve, even if her concerns are far from fully addressed. When she casts a quick look over to Alana, she sees that she is not the only one relieved by Lecter's adept handling of her little breakdown. Graham, however, looks as tense and uncomfortable as ever as he watches Lecter closely.

But even with some reassurance, she knows she should not trust anyone here readily and certainly not thoroughly. The only person she can fully trust is herself, and even then she isn't sure if she can actually manage that most of the time.

"How do you know?" she asks, a trace of bitterness finding its way into her words.

Lecter stands and straightens his suit jacket. "Because when I was sixteen, my daemon experienced lock-down. It took a few weeks for everything to clear up," he says. It's as casual an admission as if he had just described the morning's weather.

Over the last year, Abigail has had to learn a lot about deception. Some of it had come naturally - worryingly naturally when she dares to be fully honest with herself - but the rest came through necessity and practice. Lecter is hiding something from her, but she isn't sure if it's related to his story or the still unknown reason why his daemon was present the morning the complex, dangerous web of deception that had become her life finally unraveled.

She will have to take things slowly. Carefully. But she can do that. If she could survive her father, surely she can survive whatever comes after.

"Okay," she says.

A few minutes later, a Beta nurse carrying a clipboard will enter and escort Abigail to her first physical therapy session. As she lifts light weights that would have felt like nothing to her weeks ago, she dares to think seriously about the future for the first time in nearly a year.

LUNCH

Hannibal is pleased when Will arrives at his office at 12:30 PM exactly. It has only been a few hours since they crossed paths in Abigail's hospital room, but between the girl's panic attack and the distracting presence of Alana Bloom and Jack Crawford, there was no time for any one-on-one conversation.

With Will dragged across the nation at the end of Jack Crawford's leash for days, they had missed the appointment time they had agreed upon for Will's sessions. Not wanting to wait days more for that time to come around again, Hannibal had called Will to suggest a short noon session to talk through what Will had been experiencing now that he had two cases out in the field under his belt.

Perhaps Will had been too tired and disoriented from his travels to realize what he was agreeing to, but he had accepted the offer with minimal fuss. Hannibal knew that there was a high chance that Will would either forget, pretend to forget, or simply refuse to actually show up, and he had prepared himself in advance to forgive the bristly Omega for the missed appointment.

So it is therefore an extremely pleasant surprise that Will has arrived. No forgiveness necessary. He is finding it increasingly easy to forgive Will for all kinds of little moments of tactlessness and temper flares that would normally damn a pig to an ignoble fate. But, he thinks as he ushers Will into his office, Will is certainly no pig.

Will had looked tired that morning in Abigail's hospital room, and the intervening hours have only dragged him down more. Given the bags under his eyes and the slight slouch to his posture, he is clearly under-rested.

"I hope Uncle Jack isn't having you back at Quantico after this," Hannibal says.

"Half-day," Will replies. "God knows I need it. After this, I'm probably going to pick up a cheap sandwich at a convenience store for lunch and then pass out at home."

Hannibal wrinkles his nose slightly at the mention of Will's dubious-sounding lunch plans. He considers offering to treat Will to lunch, but chooses not to. He has something else to offer Will later, after all.

He focuses his attention back on Will and sees that Sabine is still hidden away. He clears his throat and gives the Omega a pointed look.

"I know, I know. I remember," Will says, waving his hand in dismissal. "At least let the door close fully first."

"There's nobody else here, Will," Hannibal says. "Not even a receptionist."

"Doesn't matter," Will says, wincing slightly as the office door closes with a quiet click. However, true to his word, Sabine crawls out from her pocket. Her coloring is hunter green with a few faint black stripes. She nearly blends in with Will's shirt, but is just different enough to not get completely lost against the fabric. But Hannibal only requested that Sabine remain out of hiding during their sessions; he didn't say that she couldn't camouflage herself. "You wouldn't skip the decompression stage before a space walk, or the multiple suit checks before handling smallpox at the CDC."

"You were willing to show Sabine to Abigail earlier today."

"Just to show her not to believe Freddie Lounds's crock of shit," Will growls, storming away from Hannibal to look out one of the office windows.

Ah, Aušrinė thinks. *So that's why he's more on edge than usual.*

"Yes, I did find Ms. Lounds's comments particularly distasteful," Hannibal says. "But-"

"If you say 'But if you kept Sabine out the way everyone else keeps their daemons out, she wouldn't be able to spread such slander', I will jump out this window."

Hannibal smiles despite himself. "*But* I confess that your hesitancy to allow her out in the world to this degree speaks to some deeper insecurities."

Will's hand comes up and reaches for the curtains. For a moment Hannibal wonders if Will is going to shut them, but he pulls his hand back and crosses his arms across his chest. "Back in the motel in Minnesota, you said that even though my aversion to daemon social mores was abnormal, it didn't make it wrong," he says quietly. "That given her form, it would be in Sabine's nature to be secretive and hide. Have you changed your mind about that?"

There is clear disappointment in Will's voice. Not quite betrayal, since he has not yet even begun to fully trust Hannibal. It's the soft but unsurprised murmur of someone who has been let down again and again by those who fail to understand. But most importantly, beneath all of that, it's so deliciously manipulative and designed to slip a sharp barb of guilt right between the ribs that it makes Hannibal's breath hitch for just a moment.

"No. I stand by what I said," Hannibal says.

"But you also want me to change."

"I want you to adapt so you can thrive in this world. And, perhaps in doing so, influence the world in turn."

Will gives a small, unconvinced hum. He looks out the window for a long moment, clearly considering something deeply. Given the way that the black stripes on Sabine slowly undulate and change, probably an internal argument with his daemon.

"When I was a freshman in university, only a couple of months after I presented, I went through a major science fiction and fantasy phase," Will says as if this is a perfectly natural turn to their conversation. "Not socially, though. I didn't belong to any role playing group. I didn't join any of the student clubs. In retrospect, I can't even say if I actually liked the prose and plotting. What I liked - what I needed - was to sit in a quiet corner of the library, surrounded by dusty and yellowed pulp paperbacks, and get lost in those other worlds for a while."

He shakes his head slightly and gives a small, mirthless laugh. "There was this one series that I really got into. The actual plot doesn't matter. But the story focused on a secret minority of humans who didn't have daemons. Well, they did, but they were part of the human's body, an internal conscience, not Dust condensed into the form of an animal and connected with a Tether. They had other magical abilities that I couldn't have cared less about. I was fascinated by how easy it was for them to hide in plain sight, to move through the society that feared and hated them simply by carrying around normal animals and keeping a low profile."

As if he were there himself, Hannibal can imagine young Will indulging in his escapism in the university library all those years ago. He is roughly fully grown, perhaps only an inch or two shorter than his current height. But he's skinny and ungainly, looking younger than he actually is the same way current Will's appearance still lingers behind his true age by several years. Sabine, still fresh from settling into an irregular form and possibly already grappling with insecurities that will persist to this day, creeps over a stack of books that are half criminology textbooks half fantasy paperbacks. The boy Will looks up, stormy eyes hidden behind large glasses, seeing him.

Hannibal dismisses the image, turning his attention back to the Will that is currently brooding by his window. "Escapism is a valuable means of finding comfort in times of stress, such as the profound life changes that come with settling and heading off to university."

"It was more than just escapism. I started… subconsciously imitating the daemonless characters, in my own small ways. Sabine stayed out less and less until one day I realized nobody else had seen her in weeks. It creeped my roommate out enough that he requested to be moved out of our dorm," Will says. He pauses for a moment. "I could have ended up like the kids in Death Valley. Completely consumed by a fantasy and exploited by someone who could use that."

"Yet something pulled you back from that brink. What was it?"

"It's going to sound ridiculous."

"Calling something ridiculous often says more about the critic than it does the so-called ridiculous matter at hand. It illustrates a rigidity in thinking that can be detrimental," Hannibal says. "Please, if you choose to worry about any aspect of my character, a lack of imagination should be extremely low on that list."

"It was a book. *The Voice of Many Waters* by K.G. Pike. I… I hated it so completely that it knocked me off of my axis. It was enough to make me question what I was doing with myself."

Hannibal takes note of the title of the book. From Will's inflection, he can tell that the Omega will be reticent to elaborate further on what, exactly, affected him so negatively. No matter. Hannibal can locate a copy and come to his own conclusions based on what he is learning about Will's sensitivities.

"The fever may have broken for you, but you still live with some of its symptoms," he says. "You still keep Sabine hidden."

Will shrugs. "Old habits."

"Will, I'll be honest with you. It's difficult for me to believe that Sabine hides away simply because you went through a specific literature phase in your late adolescence. I think there's an underlying cause that you're keeping from me. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Will-"

"I'm serious," Will says gravely. "Nothing happened."

Hannibal sighs. He is silent for a moment, considering his options. When it comes to him, it is absolutely Aušrinė's idea. *Quid pro quo,* she thinks. *The personal for the personal. If he won't respond to direct inquiry, offer another influence.*

"Earlier this morning, I told Abigail Hobbs that Aušrinė experienced lock-down when we were sixteen and that it took several weeks to resolve," he says. "That's not the full truth."

Will turns slightly from the window, saying nothing but listening intently.

"It took me several weeks to come to terms with the fact that Aušrinė had settled prematurely."

Will turns more, regarding Hannibal carefully. He takes a hesitant step forward. Then another. And another. Until he slowly sinks into the chair opposite Hannibal's own. There is no judgement in his expression, merely a sharp and pointed curiosity that Hannibal feels against his neck like the edge of a knife. It's a glimpse of the Will that Hannibal first saw when he turned his gun on Hobbs' daemon and fired and fired and fired. The Will who has captured Hannibal's attention so effectively.

"What happened?" Will asks, echoing the question Hannibal just posed to him.

"A home invasion in the early hours of my 16th birthday," Hannibal replies. "The intensity and trauma of the situation must have caused a hormonal response that triggered my first rut. Perhaps my survival instincts thought that I would be served well by the spike in territoriality and strength. Or, more poetically, perhaps I knew my childhood was over the moment those men broke into my home."

He doesn't tell Will the details, like the fact that he managed to rip out the throat of the weakest member of the group with only his teeth before the rest of them knocked him out. Or how that act was probably the last thing Mischa saw before she died. Or anything about Mischa at all, the wound of her loss still raw all these decades later. Perhaps one day, but not today.

"I'm sorry," Will says softly, haltingly, like he isn't sure what to do with the information. There is no pity in his voice, however. Simply pure empathy.

"Thank you," Hannibal says. "I bring it up as a show of good faith. I need you to know that I understand what traumatic settling is like from first-hand experience. You will not be judged or pitied if you choose to open up."

A small, harrowed expression flickers across Will's face. "I… I can't do that. Yet."

Hannibal smiles. Although obviously not as good as a full admission, the statement is an excellent wedge in the door. "Then I will be here to listen to you when you are ready," he says. "I won't press you on the matter anymore. When you feel like you can talk about it, it's important that you don't feel like you were goaded."

Will nods distractedly, clearly lost in his own thoughts. He startles slightly when the office clock chimes 1:30.

The impromptu session is over, and soon Hannibal's office will be darkened by the drippy, miserable presence of Franklyn Froideveaux. If only he could sacrifice Froideveaux's time and offer it in supplication to Will. But, hopefully, this won't be the last he'll see of Will today.

Will is quiet and pensive as he prepares to leave. As he gets ready, Hannibal strides over to his desk. "Before you leave, there's something I wanted to give you," he says. "I almost forgot about it."

He hands Will a small metal tag with the word 'BUSTER' on the front and Will's phone number on the back. "I think it must have fallen off while your dogs were roughhousing," he explains, thinking about how easily he slipped the tag off the little terrier's collar. "I found it when I came to check in on them while you were in Death Valley."

"I was wondering where that went. I was just hoping that none of them ate it," Will says as he slips the tag into his pants pocket. “Thank you, by the way. For taking care of my dogs again.”

“It was no trouble. I'm happy to have been of help.”

“I'd ask if there was something I could do to make it up to you, but Alphas can get… weird about reciprocity,” Will says. His ears, which barely peek through his dark curls, turn a shade of pink that Hannibal finds quite aesthetically pleasing. “No offense.”

“None taken. I'm a modern enough Alpha to know that performing a favor on my part does not result in an obligation on your part. That said, I can think of something I could offer that, if accepted, would make me very pleased indeed."

Will gives him a suspicious look. "What?"

"I'm hosting a small dinner party tonight. Jack, his mate Bella, and Alana are all coming. I realize it's rather short notice, but it would be wonderful if you could attend. And hopefully the quality of the food will make up for the sandwich you'll be inflicting on yourself shortly."

"You know that for most people, that would just be heaping a favor on top of another favor. 'You're welcome; now let me cook for you to settle the score' isn't exactly typical."

"I thought it should be quite apparent by now that I never strive to be typical," Hannibal replies, amusement in his words.

"Well. I wouldn't want you to have to change your arrangements just to squeeze me in last minute."

"Truthfully, I was hoping you'd be able to attend when I obtained the food. There will be plenty to go around. I actually wanted to ask you to come when I first decided to hold the dinner party, but I like to give my invitations either by formal letter or in person, neither of which were possible while you were on your last case."

Will reaches up and rubs at the back of his neck, still looking uncertain. "What time?"

"8 o'clock."

Another few seconds of hesitation tick by as Sabine crawls back to her hiding space. Finally, Will concedes, "It's not like I've had time to go grocery shopping or cook since I got back from Nevada."

Hannibal smiles. "Tonight, then."

When he escorts Will out of his office, Franklyn Froideveaux is already waiting for his appointment. The Beta stares at Will as he leaves, looking slightly stricken to see an attractive Omega leaving Hannibal's presence. Will, for his part, doesn't even seem to acknowledge Franklyn's existence.

During Franklyn's session, Hannibal tells the Beta that he is experimenting with electronic note-taking. In actuality, he uses his tablet to search for *The Voice of Many Waters*. His usual resources for book purchases come up empty, and he suspects the paperback must be very out of print and difficult to find. The only information he can find about it is a scan of the book's cover, a quintessentially 60s genre illustration of a young, beautiful Omega man with curly

blond hair leaning over the side of a small boat. He smiles placidly as his thin fingers trail in the water, leaving behind streaks of red that could be blood or wine. Seated in the boat behind him, a slightly older Alpha with dark hair regards the Omega with an uncertain expression. The Alpha has a jackdaw daemon perched on his shoulder, while the Omega has no visible daemon present.

Intrigued, Hannibal leaves a message of interest and willingness to negotiate for pricing on a forum dedicated to collecting and trading rare paperback novels. Now he just has to wait and see if he gets a bite.

A few hours later, Hannibal will stop by his favorite florist on his way home to select some last minute fresh flowers for the evening's centerpiece. As he peruses the offerings, he will find a display of flowers that match the exact shade of pink that had flushed across Will's ears earlier. When he sees that they're Sweet Williams, he will smile slightly and buy them all.

DINNER

Of course Hannibal Lecter lives in an extremely high-end neighborhood that makes Will's skin itch as soon as he turns onto the street. Thankfully it isn't a gated community, so Will doesn't have to make unbearably awkward eye contact with a member of the working class hired specifically to act as a security guard and keep others of their income level out.

As Will drives past the opulent houses, he suddenly recalls a humid summer afternoon when he was twelve years old. They were in the middle of moving the houseboat upriver to another town that might have work for his dad when they passed a giant, gleaming plantation home not far from the water's edge. His father had scoffed and spit into the muddy river once the house came into view.

“You ever end up invited to a house like that, you turn tail and run, boy,” he had drawled. “They only get that rich ‘cause they eat the poor like us. Generation after generation, they eat our future. Make the mistake of trusting ‘em and you end up stuck in their teeth.”

Will would be lying if he said his father's words didn't ring true now. Now that he's passing all the borderline-mansions lined up in neat rows like perfectly aligned giant's teeth.

Finally, he finds himself at Hannibal's home. Jack and his mate Bella have arrived just before him, and upon seeing them exit their car, he is hit with the horrible realization that he is massively under-dressed. Jack is wearing a dark blue suit, and Bella a sleek champagne-colored dress that compliments her complexion. Her hair is styled up perfectly with her Luzon bleeding-heart dove daemon perched on top like an ornament.

He should have known that all of Hannibal's finesse and fineries would call for more than off-the-rack slacks and a button-down shirt. Will grips the steering wheel tighter, considering driving away as he watches Hannibal open the door to greet Jack and Bella. His grip tightens when he sees that Hannibal has noticed him parked awkwardly across the street. Once Jack and Bella are inside, the Alpha stays in the doorframe, his head tilted in amused invitation.

“We've been spotted,” Sabine remarks drily from where she sits on the dashboard, her skin matching the slate grey of the car's interior.

“I can see that,” Will replies through gritted teeth.

“It'd be pretty rude to leave now that he's seen us. Really funny, but rude. So you know what my vote is.”

Will grumbles as he grabs his daemon and unceremoniously shoves her in his pocket. He keeps his eyes on his feet as he walks up to Hannibal's door.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal says, his voice warm with good humor. “I was starting to think you weren't coming in.”

“So was I.”

Hannibal steps aside and ushers Will inside. The Alpha's home is even more richly decorated than his office, favoring dark colors and low lighting. Hannibal also appears to be an avid collector of art pieces, as Will finds himself passing items of interest like a beautifully carved bear statue.

The dining room is similarly designed with a dark blue accent wall opposite a wall with a stone installation where many small plants are growing. When Hannibal seats Will with his back to the plants, he gets a small whiff of rosemary and thyme. They must be herbs that Hannibal uses in his cooking.

Directly across from where he now sits, displayed lovingly above a mantle, is a print of a famous painting depicting the extremely taboo mating between the Greek princess Leda and Zeus's daemon in the form of a swan. Will stares at it, unblinking.

“I know, I was shocked when I first saw it too,” Alana whispers to him conspiratorially, leaning closer from her seat beside him. Her glass of beer is already half empty and there's a pleasant rosiness to her cheeks.

“It's fine art,” Hannibal says.

“It's *very* confrontational, Hannibal,” Alana says, grinning over the rim of her glass.

There's a strange split second where Hannibal's expression is even more unreadable than usual. It is scrupulously blank, and Will can only guess what lies below the surface. If he had to make that guess, he would suppose that it was pure calculation, trying to determine if her words have offended him.

Gradually, a small smile tugs at Hannibal's lips. No offense taken. “All truly great art is confrontational in some capacity or another. Be it paint on a canvas, text on a page, or food served on a plate, it should challenge the expectations of those who indulge in it.”

“I'm not offended,” Will mutters, chafing under the stereotype of the Omega with delicate sensibilities, even if nobody at the table has tried to apply that to him.

“Me neither,” Bella says, possibly sensing Will's discomfort. The only other Omega at the table, she gives him a smile of solidarity.

Jack laughs. “Fine, I'll bite. Dr. Lecter, when I first saw that thing hanging over the mantle, I didn't know what to think. It's grown on me, though. So to speak.”

“So you're saying we should get a print for our dining room, then?” Bella teases him.

“Well, I wouldn't go that far,” Jack says, taking a sip of his wine.

What are we doing here? Sabine asks mournfully through the Tether. *In an extremely fancy house, about to eat an extremely fancy dinner, making small talk with colleagues. We are out of our element.*

She has a point. There are so few places in the world where Will and Sabine feel completely at-ease and natural and like they belong. Off the top of his head, he can only think of his little house out in the middle of nowhere and a few of his favorite rivers, streams, and bayous.

Fortunately, he knows everyone here. Even though he has only met Bella a couple of times in passing, he's sure Jack must have vented to her about Will's lack of social graces enough. Nobody here is a stranger who has yet to realize that Will can't or won't be a charming social butterfly.

The conversation soon steers to another topic thanks to Alana showing off all the pictures she took of her youngest brother, his mate, and their newborn son while she was in New York for the birth.

While Alana goes through her pictures, Hannibal plays the merry host readying his guests for their meal. Before the food is ready to be plated, he brings out a small but elaborate centerpiece composed of red and dusty pink flowers, ruby red pomegranate seeds, and a few curling fern fronds.

“The centerpiece is lovely, Dr. Lecter. But where on earth did you get Sweet Williams at this time of year?” Bella asks.

Will looks up from the baby picture Alana is showing him, focusing on Hannibal and Bella.

“Sweet William. What an interesting name for a flower,” Hannibal muses. “The florist had them listed as dianthus.”

It's a coincidence, Will thinks to Sabine as he fakes a smile for Alana.

Bullshit, Sabine retorts, her thoughts hot and irritated and bordering on panic. *You've seen how poised and polished Lecter is. 'Coincidence' isn't in his vast, sparkling vocabulary. He picked those flowers on purpose, to send a message.*

Look, we'll deal with it later, alright? Will replies.

He tries desperately not to think about it as Hannibal brings out the food. He focuses on that damned swan painting when Hannibal sets a plate in front of him. It must be his imagination that the Alpha is lingering slightly long in his personal space.

Fortunately, the food is delicious and a welcome distraction from his own tumultuous thoughts. He had eaten food prepared by Hannibal before back in Minnesota, and that protein scramble had been wonderful. But it's nothing compared to this pomegranate-glazed venison fresh from Hannibal's kitchen. The succulent meat is supported by fresh seasonal vegetables and buttery roasted potatoes.

Will notices Bella hesitate slightly, regarding the meat on her fork with a slightly pinched expression. She still takes the morsel into her mouth and chews, savoring the flavor, but a ghost of that concerned look remains.

Hannibal must have noticed her expression as well. "Is something wrong, Bella?" he asks. "Is the food disagreeable?"

"Oh, no, it's delicious," Bella says, smiling faintly. "It's just… it's a little morbid, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Jack asks between bites.

"Well, it's just…" she sighs. "Jack told me about the Hobbs girl's daemon being stuck as an elk. Like her father's. And here we are eating venison."

"Ah, that hadn't even occurred to me," Hannibal says. "I can certainly see why it would put you off. Rest assured, it is merely a coincidence. I have an associate who enjoys hunting and bagged a large, surly buck who was causing a commotion with his brethren. You might say it was a stag party."

Alana snorts into her beer. Despite the agonized groan that Sabine sends wobbling through the Tether, Will's lips twitch slightly upward at the joke. Hannibal's smile widens when he catches it.

"Besides, daemons come in so many different forms that if people didn't eat any animal that could remind them of daemons, then nobody would eat meat at all," Jack says.

"Some people *do* do that, Jack," Bella replies fondly. "Or need I remind you that we had to have very stern words with our wedding caterer to keep squab off the menu because of Atlas?" As if to prove support her point, her daemon ruffles his feathers with a visible shudder.

"Or the fact that Frederick Chilton keeps chicken out of the meal rotation at BSHCI," Alana says. "Can't give the patients any ideas."

Jack laughs. "Oh, Chilton would have a stroke if he heard you refer to his daemon like that. How could you fail to realize that he's a-"

"- show quality red-saddled Yokohama rooster," Jack and Alana recite together.

Alana rolls her eyes. "Don't I know it," she says
She looks down, swirling what little beer remains in her glass with a sour expression on her face. "He's been really quiet lately. No good can come of that. I think he's working on a project."

"I've only met Dr. Chilton in passing, though of course his reputation precedes him in psychiatric circles," Hannibal admits. He takes a sip of his wine. "Whatever he's cooking up, it's bound to be interesting."

"You just say that because you've never had to clean up any of his messes," Alana grouses.

The conversation drifts on throughout the evening with Will staying mostly silent. Truly an excellent host, Hannibal is able to coax him into joining in a few times while not exhausting Will with ceaseless attention. It makes some of his paranoia ebb slightly, but Sabine remains petulantly on edge.

The night winds down shortly after 10 PM. Jack and Bella are the first to go, citing the long drive back to their home. Will has a long drive too, and he's torn between fleeing as fast as he can back to the safety of Wolf Trap and sticking around to try to assuage some of his uncertainty about Hannibal's intentions.

Ultimately, he chooses the latter. He has seen what Alphas are capable of if they aren't given clear, hard boundaries. Hell, he's seen what they can do even if they are. But he does also believe that Hannibal is genuinely concerned with keeping up his gentlemanly demeanor, so Will has no rational reason to suspect that the psychiatrist will be anything but cordial when confronted.

Alana leaves about 20 minutes after Jack and Bella. Too tipsy to drive, she waves goodbye to Hannibal and Will from the backseat of her taxi. That leaves Will and Hannibal alone, standing by the Alpha's front door.

Will knows that objectively he isn't ugly or unattractive. He has several qualities that are often prized in Omegas, such as his curly hair and expressive eyes. But he feels like a dog that has been willed a luxury sports car by an eccentric owner; he can't use his gifts, and he feels like he'd crash and burn if he tried.

Because of this, he has spent his entire adult life trying to diminish his attractive qualities as much as possible. Hide his eyes behind glasses. Don't bother styling his hair. Dress plainly. Always smell a little bit like wet dog. So far it has worked out pretty well for him, and he has largely been left alone and unnoticed.

Now, though, he isn't so sure if that is still the case. If, somehow, the cultured Alpha before him has not been deterred by any of his defensive lines. His heart hammers and his stomach churns at the idea that all his efforts may be in vain. The uncertainty has given a world-class headache the opportunity to start brewing in one side of his head, the way that a small swirl of tropical pressure hints at the hurricane to come.

He thinks about what, if anything, to tell Hannibal. *I don't date.* - True, but too presumptuous. Implies that he thinks Hannibal is interested in him romantically or sexually and not just trying to tease him. The Alpha may be a Renaissance man with a very broad range of interests and knowledge, but he can't know everything. He can't just assume that Hannibal both knew the name of the flower and was insinuating something to Will.

Also, on the off-chance that Hannibal actually is interested in him in a capacity that exceeds professional curiosity and personal courtesy, *I don't date* leaves open an argument to keep things strictly physical.

I'm not interested in sex or romance. - A big lie, and possibly one easily seen through. It isn't that Will has no interest. It's just that whatever hypothetical interest he may have would not be worth the massive amount of trust he would need to invest in order for it to work.

Too many thoughts, none of them right to broach the topic. His mind races, trying to plot out what course of action he can take. But above all else, God, his head hurts.

“My name isn't William,” he blurts. It's the first odd thought to make it through the log jam in his mind. “It's just Will. Like volition, as my dad used to say. It's not short for anything.”

Hannibal blinks at him. “I'm sorry, Will, I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. I don’t think I addressed you as William, but if I did-”

Shit! Sabine hisses. Even though she is tucked away secret and safe in Will's pocket, he can sense her colors strobing red and black in mortification. *It was a misunderstanding! Get us out of here!*

"No, uh, it's fine. I must have misheard you and Bella talking about the flowers in the centerpiece," Will lies, trailing off and taking a step further away.

"Ah, that must have been it. Still, I'll take care to make sure I don't slip up. It's a basic courtesy to refer to one's friends by their preferred names."

That catches Will off-guard. It even cuts off Sabine's inner turmoil, leaving only a moment of utter silence ringing across their Tether. "Friends?"

"Of course. I wouldn't invite a patient to dinner. It would be a breach of professional boundaries."

"But I *am* your patient."

"You are much, much more than that, Will Graham."

Will flexes his hands at his side awkwardly, his gaze focused on the ground. The night wind picks up slightly, blowing in thick cloud cover and with it what is perhaps the first cool breeze of early autumn. The leaves in the trees shudder against the wind, already sounding a bit drier than they did at the height of summer. Soon they will turn blood red. The transition between late summer and early fall is at hand.

"Good night, Dr. Lecter," Will says, taking another step back. He glances up from the ground just enough to see the practically microscopic twinge of disappointment tugging at the Alpha's lips. After a moment's hesitation, Will quietly corrects himself, "Hannibal."

The name feels strange and weighty on his tongue, the syllables unfamiliar when stitched together. The kind of thing that only feels natural with practice. He sees the disappointment dissipate, replaced with a small smile.

"Good night, Will."

A few days later, Abigail will be released from the general hospital to a recovery facility for people experiencing daemon-related traumas. Things will settle into something that approaches normalcy for a few weeks. And then Frederick Chilton will announce he has the Chesapeake Ripper in custody.

A Plagiary

Chapter Notes

Didn't quite make my chapter deadline in July, but for those who are following me on Twitter (@rosenritter42), that's no surprise. Had a couple of stressful weeks in July and even though it's looking like August is going to have its own stresses, hopefully it won't be as bad! Feel free to follow me there for status updates like that so you'll know chapter progress and things like that.

One small heads-up for this chapter: it contains a plot element for The Golden Compass/Northern Lights which is a mystery in that book. It has a VERY different history here than it does in His Dark Materials, but if you don't want any spoilers at all for that book, you might want to read it first.

Last chapter's very brief notes are HERE.

The next chapter, ~~A Husk~~ A Fever, will be up when it's ready!

Will is not sitting in Hannibal's waiting room when their appointment time comes. His car also isn't parked outside, all three spots reserved for patients empty. Hannibal sends Aušrinė out into the night sky to see if she can find him anywhere along the block. Nothing.

He takes out his phone and tries calling Will. It goes directly to voicemail.

"He's probably at Quantico," Aušrinė reasons. "He keeps his phone on when he consults at crime scenes, and we've been able to get in touch with him shortly after he leaves work. But he likely keeps his phone off when he teaches."

"But it's far too late for one of his classes to still be in session."

"Yes," Aušrinė agrees. "It is."

For any other patient who has missed their appointment, Hannibal would leave a polite reminder about his 24 hour cancellation policy and, if they are particularly uninteresting or otherwise substandard, he may consider adding their card to his recipe rolodex. For Will Graham, he drives all the way from Baltimore to Quantico.

Once his credentials are checked and he's allowed inside the complex, he heads for Will's classroom. Thankfully the Omega is indeed there, standing over his desk with his arms supporting him as he stares down at several files. His expression is glassy and vacant, like the unblinking stare of a ceramic doll.

"Will?" Hannibal asks as he comes closer.

Will blinks once, lazily. Then again, and again a few more times in quicker succession. He looks around, disoriented and slightly alarmed. "Hannibal?" he asks, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm afraid I should be the one asking you that," Hannibal says, watching as Will wearily sits down in his chair. "Do you know what time it is?"

Will's frown deepens and he shakes his head.

"Our appointment would have started nearly an hour and a half ago."

"What?" Will breathes, disbelieving. He looks down at his own watch and stares at it as if it is some unknowable alien thing clinging to his wrist. He sighs and buries his face in his hands, rubbing at his eyes. "I don't… I'm sorry. I lost track of time. Really long day."

"Well, we may not be in my office, but I did come all the way out here," Hannibal says. "It may be helpful to discuss why this day has drained you so much."

Will sighs. "Frederick Chilton called us over to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane at…" he says, pausing and squinting in thought. "8? No, 7 AM. One of the inmates killed a nurse overnight."

"That's unfortunate, but I'm afraid I don't see how it warrants a call to the FBI."

"It does when the call comes with a claim that the inmate who committed the murder is the Chesapeake Ripper."

Although Hannibal and Aušrinė remain stoic and composed externally, the raven daemon laughs gleefully across their Tether. *Oh,* she croons. *This evening just became much, much more interesting.*

"I'm sure many people have claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper over the years," Hannibal says. "Furthermore, a professional like Frederick Chilton must certainly understand that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

"Oh, his evidence is far from extraordinary," Will says. "It's all circumstantial, but Jack wants us to be thorough. It's… personal, for him. One of his proteges vanished while hunting the Ripper."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hannibal says, and it is genuinely true. He took no personal pleasure in the death of Miriam Lass, who had only been doing her job. The only sin that she had committed had been having a curiosity and ambition strong enough to convince her to peek through Hannibal's sketches without a search warrant. "I hope that pain doesn't blind Jack or make him reckless."

"Yeah," Will agrees, his voice tired. "Especially since Abel Gideon definitely isn't the Chesapeake Ripper."

"I'm curious what your reasoning is."

"Chilton's theory is that the last known Ripper kill," Will says as he taps on a picture of a Beta man impaled with all manner of grotesque instruments, "happened shortly before Gideon was arrested for the murder of his mate and her parents. And Gideon matches the broader strokes of the Ripper's profile: Alpha, male, middle-aged, affluent, and a medical professional. Put that together with the fact that the murder of the nurse was staged as a pale imitation of the Wound Man kill and that is all Chilton needs to make his claim."

Will puts a picture of the original Wound Man murder beside a picture of the murdered nurse. Then he reaches into his folders and pulls out two more pictures, both of the crime scenes taken using a Rusakov-filtered camera. The original Wound Man glows with Dust while Gideon's replica does not.

"That's quite a Dust disparity. Was the victim of the earlier Wound Man kill another case where the daemon died first?" Hannibal asks, knowing better than anyone else in the world that the man and his daemon died simultaneously as per usual.

"Dust is drawn to art," Will says. "Authentic effort. Craftmanship. It loves the poet, the playwright, the musician, the artisan. It will be drawn to a painting, but not a photographed copy of it. It avoids the mass-produced or the uninspired. Both of these photos were taken after roughly the same amount of time had elapsed after the victims' deaths. That's how I knew Gideon wasn't the Ripper. There's no art in him. No ambient Dust drawn to his work. He's just a plagiarist."

Hannibal says nothing. Will's words make something warm start to thrum in his veins, as hot and electric as a sparking live wire.

Will must interpret his silence as uneasiness or judgement because the Omega shakes his head and sighs. "Sorry," he says. "I know it's creepy. Jack hates when I talk about the Chesapeake Ripper like that. Says it's too close to flattery."

"Please, Will, never apologize for speaking candidly with me. I want you to always feel like you can speak authentically and openly."

"Good," Will murmurs, looking away. "Thanks."

"Besides, from what little I do know about the Ripper, I suspect your analysis is much closer than Jack's. The Ripper will never be caught if his aesthetics are not understood."

Will's shoulders sag a little. Maybe it's from the long, stressful day, but there's a soft, subtle quality to the way that the Omega presses his lips together that implies that there's more to the gesture than simple exhaustion. Will is starved for validation, to have all of his thoughts heard without judgement.

"It wasn't just the stress of being in that miserable so-called hospital all day, or having Jack tense due to the phony Ripper connection, or enduring Frederick Chilton's…" Will pauses, pulling a sour face. "Charms. There was something that Gideon said that's been under my skin all day."

"What was it?"

Will doesn't answer immediately, instead drumming his fingers against his desk in consideration. Finally, he replies, "I suppose I could just show you. Chilton allowed us to take a copy of the security footage during the interview with Abel Gideon."

"I'm sure that was no easy feat."

"Like pulling teeth," Will groans. "But like I said… Jack's obsessive if you so much as even think about the Ripper around him. Hang on."

He taps on the keyboard of his laptop, bringing the sleeping device back to life. He scrolls through a list of files and selects one, opening it to reveal a black-and-white video taken from a security camera. Will looks up at the classroom's overhead media displays and frowns when they remain dark.

"Guess the media center is shut down for the night," he says, turning the laptop so Hannibal can see it better. "You might need to get closer to see some of the details."

No complaints here, Aušrinė thinks, riding Hannibal's shoulder as he draws even nearer to Will.

Will forwards through some of the footage, and Hannibal can see the slightly grainy forms of Will, Jack, and Alana enter and approach Gideon's cell. The murderer is waiting for them, perched motionless on a chair in his cell the same way his mockingbird daemon sits perched on the top of his head. An orderly, his face obscured by the angle of the camera, stands nearby. His daemon is also difficult to make out clearly as it sits on the shoulder further away from the camera, but the shape of its tail feathers hint that it is likely some type of bird of prey.

Finally, Will allows the footage to play properly.

"If my parents' daemons didn't want us to carve a swath of chaos through life, then they probably shouldn't have named her after such a wrathful figure as Medea," Gideon says as his daemon preens. "Probably should've just called her Becky. And how about you, Mr. Graham? What name did your daemon get saddled with?"

"You aren't going to cooperate unless I tell you, are you."

"Very astute."

"Sabine."

"After the Omegas who were kidnapped and ravished by Roman soldiers?" Gideon asks, grinning. Even with the somewhat grainy footage from the security camera, Hannibal can see an unpleasant shudder work its way down Will's spine as Gideon's eyes slowly glide up and down his body. "Must have been a bit awkward to be an Omega named after that. Might as well be a cow named 'Steak'."

"After the river that borders Louisiana and Texas," Will replies through gritted teeth.

"Pity. You are very kidnappable," Gideon says. He turns to the orderly. "Isn't he just?"

The orderly remains silent, staring straight ahead.

"Shut up," Jack barks. At his side, Themis draws her haunches high and lowers her head into a threatening stance.

"That's inappropriate, Abel," Alana chastises, clearly trying to take a more moderate approach to the killer's provocations. "Let's get back on topic. If you really are the Chesapeake Ripper like you claim, why admit it now and not when you were arrested years ago? What did you hope to accomplish with this?"

Gideon is silent for a moment. He frowns, a bit of confusion tightening at his brow, but it soon smooths out into his previous glib expression.

"Maybe because it was funny to string everyone along for a while. Watch you run around like chickens with your heads cut off. But even the best jokes get old eventually. I've had enough of living in this lap of luxury on the state's dime," Gideon says, gesturing around his cell. His words crisp and sharp, he continues, "So to answer your question: what I want is the cut. Figured if I made a big enough stink I just might get it."

"The cut?" Jack asks.

"Intercision," Will says.

Gideon winks. "Bingo."

"Intercision has been banned in Maryland for over 40 years," Jack says gruffly. "They aren't going to reverse that just for you."

"Well," Gideon drawls. "Guess I'll just have to make an even bigger stink."

Will stops the video. "Chilton cut off the interview not long after that."

"I can see why you might be unsettled," Hannibal says, noting how Will clenches his fists atop his desk. Perhaps his words are too close to being patronizing, so he elaborates, "It's hard and perhaps unwise to dismiss a kidnapping threat when it's coming from someone who has killed so recently."

"That's not what's been bothering me. I know Alpha bluster when I hear it," Will says. He sighs and leans back heavily in his chair, apparently forgetting in his exhaustion and disorientation how close Hannibal had moved to him in order to watch the video. The back of his head bumps against Hannibal's chest, and he quickly reels away from the unexpected touch.

"What's bothering me," Will continues, quick and eager to keep the subject elsewhere, "is his request for intercision. There's a reason it's now banned in all the states. Even Texas. Do you know how nightmarish and cruel a type of punishment has to be for Texas to think it's too far? And the worst part is that in some states it's only been banned for a few decades. There's always a few ancient, bloodthirsty senators who are nostalgic for the 'good old days' and their right to inflict the worst fate you can imagine on a person."

Righteous indignation is a good, powerful look on Will. The anger makes his skin glow, makes his eyes shine bright. But there's a feverish quality to his fury that gives Hannibal pause. He allows himself a deep draw of breath through the nose, something which could easily be passed off as a weary sigh of agreement with Will's withering assessment. He takes in Will's scent, a bouquet that he has grown to appreciate more and more as his delicate, burgeoning friendship with Will has grown.

There's a note of subtle, burnt-out sweetness to Will's scent. It's new, or at the very least newly powerful enough to be detected. It isn't an approaching heat; the clinical sterility of Will's suppressants is still very much a part of his scent. This new thing is like caramel that has been left to char and smoke in an unsupervised pan. It's the start of a fire in a sugar cane field after a lightning strike.

It's encephalitis, Aušrinė realizes, and the revelation has dread and the thrill of opportunity racing across their Tether in equal portions. He and Aušrinė will have much to consider in light of Will's disease and a very precarious tightrope to walk.

"Perhaps Abel Gideon's request is a hint in and of itself," Hannibal muses, showing no outward sign of his grave realization.

Will gives him a curious look.

"Intercision could be interpreted as the ultimate form of detachment. That of the body from its very soul. Those who survive intercision are left wholly numbed, incapable of creativity and other higher forms of thought. It's the kind of procedure that can only sound appealing to someone who finds himself connected to something which he longs to be rid of."

"An unwelcome invasion," Will supplies, his brow furrowing in thought. His eyes widen and he stares at Hannibal, shaken. "A few weeks ago, at the dinner you hosted for the Crawfords, Alana, and I, Alana mentioned something about Chilton maybe having a project. He could have been working on Gideon, convincing him that he's the Chesapeake Ripper."

So wonderfully sharp, even with his mind on fire, Aušrinė marvels softly. *What could he see and what connections could he make without the smoke in his eyes?*

"Psychic driving is a very serious allegation, Will," Hannibal says. "It should only be levied with substantial proof."

"Which is why I need to understand Gideon's mindset more," Will insists. He pauses for a moment, likely considering something internally with Sabine. "Have you ever been to the Philadelphia Museum of Daemonology?"

"Unfortunately, no. It's the most thorough research museum on daemonology in the country, isn't it?"

Will nods. "I think I might go this weekend," he says. "They have things on display that may help clarify Gideon's thinking for me. It can be… a lot to take in. I may need to call you after so I can sort through it all mentally."

"I could do more than simply accept your call," Hannibal says, smiling slightly. "I'd be happy to visit the museum with you. Only if you'd appreciate the company, of course."

"It's only a few days' notice. You shouldn't have to alter your schedule on my behalf."

"Although I try to keep myself busy, I do have free weekends from time to time. Fortunately, this coming weekend happens to be one. No imposition on your part."

"Well… if you'd like."

"I would. How does 3 PM on Saturday sound to you?"

They agree to meet in front of the museum at the appointed time. Hannibal considers offering to drive Will home given his earlier lost time episode but ultimately decides against it. He has been extraordinarily lucky in getting Will to spend time with him on Saturday, and he doesn't want to risk overwhelming the Omega. Instead, he tells Will to take care and stay alert on the roads back to Wolf Trap, and that he will happily tell Jack Crawford that Will needs a day off to rest tomorrow if he needs it.

On his own drive to Baltimore, Hannibal and Aušrinė consider their own plans now that they have Will's encephalitis in play.

*****

Will arrives at the destination about fifteen minutes after Hannibal, but still about five minutes before they had agreed to meet. The Omega exits the taxi and seems slightly surprised to see him already waiting.

"Thought I'd get here first," Will says as he approaches.

"I can have a rather draconian approach to my personal punctuality," Hannibal says. "Did you take a taxi all the way from DC?"

"God, no. I took a train. I would have walked from the station, but the weather…"

As if to support his argument, the darkening storm clouds above rumble ominously, and a few fat, heavy raindrops start to pelt the concrete beneath them. One drop hits Aušrinė where she sits perched on Hannibal's shoulder, and she ruffles her feathers irritably.

"Well," Hannibal says, gesturing for Will to enter before him, "I believe that's our cue."

The lobby of the museum is just spacious enough to echo, which means that aside from the excited shouts of children, everyone milling about from the ticket counter to the exhibit hall entrance or to the gift shop is whispering politely. A few young staff members are setting out early Halloween decorations: friendly paper ghosts hanging from wire, a string of plastic bats with light-up eyes strung up around the ticket booth, and most importantly some banners advertising upcoming exhibits.

One that is clearly aimed at very small children reads "SPOOKY DAEMONS: JUST MISUNDERSTOOD running October 1-31" along with smiling cartoons of a black cat, a

furry spider, a snake, and a raven.

Hannibal chuckles as he looks up at the ad. "You know, considering how much of my practice involves helping people overcome the anxiety of the social stereotypes related to their daemons, I've never understood why ravens are considered so 'spooky'," he says, but there's no indignation in his voice. "But perhaps I'm slightly biased."

"It's because corvids are extremely intelligent and therefore unpredictable. We as a species don't like it when an animal isn't docile and easily malleable or interested in pleasing us, even if they lack the fangs, claws, or venom needed to harm us," Will says as he leads them to the line at the ticket booth.

Aušrinė hops to Hannibal's right shoulder, the one closest to Will. "Thank you for the compliments," she says.

There's an implied intimacy when a daemon speaks directly to a human who is not their own. But it's a broad, nebulous intimacy, just as likely to happen between family members as it is between close friends as it is between lovers. A conversational caress. So far, Hannibal and Aušrinė have been careful to just brush up against that particular cultural boundary. This particular move would certainly be considered a toe crossing over that line. The question is whether Will will balk and chastise or accept it as one of his therapist's little quirks.

Will looks at the raven out of the corner of his eye. For a moment, Hannibal can see the storm waging behind the Omega's eyes. He turns his gaze to the back of the head of the balding middle-aged Beta in front of him. "Being carrion opportunists with a taste for eyes probably doesn't help," he mutters wryly.

Hannibal smiles. Intimacy accepted.

"Eyes are vastly overrated, actually," Aušrinė whispers, her tone easy to mistake for a joke. "Tongue, on the other hand… now that's a treat."

Will's lips contort into a strange little shape that Hannibal immediately wants to sketch over and over across the fine, stiff pages of a quality sketchbook. In that one moment, that little sliver of time, he can think of no greater prize than having the opportunity to see Will Graham trying to stifle a laugh every day for the rest of his days.

Will and Hannibal purchase their tickets separately; Will buys his first, possibly to intentionally prevent Hannibal from buying two tickets for the both of them. They are each given a dark orange wristband to allow them into the age-restricted basement level of the museum.

"Gotta make sure that the happy families don't see the seedy underbelly of daemonology," Will says, frowning at the wristband as they enter the museum. "Can't have the kids actually learning anything useful."

"You seem rather dismissive of the all-ages exhibits," Hannibal notes. "I take it you've been here before?"

"Once. Right after I moved to Virginia. I came here looking for answers about irregular daemons."

"Did you find those answers, Will?"

Will is silent for a moment. "No. I had nightmares for about a week, though," he says. When he sees the curious expression on Hannibal's face, he smiles bitterly. "You'll see."

Just as Will said, the exhibits on the first floor of the museum favor a technicolor, sanitized approach to the subject of daemonology. At first, Will moves quickly for the back of the building towards the stairs to the museum's lower level. But the Omega soon realizes that Hannibal is moving far more leisurely behind him. He slows his pace for a few steps, stops, then makes his way back to Hannibal.

"You actually want to see this stuff?" Will asks incredulously, jolting when a small army of excited kindergarteners celebrating a birthday party nearly slam into him as they race to the next interactive display.

"Why not? I've never been to this museum before, and it feels a bit disrespectful to come all this way and rush through half of it. Unless, of course, you're under time constraints..."

Will contorts in an awkward full-body shrug. "Not really," he mutters, looking away. "Just my train, and that's not til much later. And it's a Saturday, after all."

Hannibal beams at him. "Thank you for indulging me, Will."

It doesn't take long for Hannibal to understand what irritates Will about the family-friendly side of the Philadelphia Museum of Daemonology. It's all the hope, all the happy little platitudes about settling that don't seem to apply to him. Will is not a cynical and callous creature by nature; the strength of his empathy alone can attest to that. But somewhere in Will's past, something planted a seed in the deepest corners of his heart that has taken root and grown into a great strangling vine of pessimism. Knotted and tangled within him, his softer parts crowded out and starved by the invasion.

A lesser Alpha would consider an Omega like Will a challenge. A feral, weed-infested garden that needs to be tamed and pruned until it can bear sweet fruit. And Hannibal would be lying to himself if he said he didn't see some appeal in that. But what the lesser Alphas don't understand is that the petty joys of having a pretty little garden cannot come close to the satisfaction of knowing the path through a thick and dangerous wood.

When he finds out what has made Will the way he is - and it is certainly a when, not an if - he will not use that information to try to heal Will. Will needs to be honed, like the edge of a blade, not healed. Hannibal suspects that if he uses the information at all, it would be to hunt down anyone who caused that trauma. Those who are not worthy to leave a lasting impression on Will.

It should alarm us, Aušrinė notes through the Tether as they follow Will to the next exhibit, a display about the link between Dust accumulation and daemons. *These thoughts we're having. They could be a liability.*

And yet you don't sound very alarmed, Hannibal replies.

Aušrinė doesn't bother collecting her next thoughts into the form of conversation. She just sends them over to Hannibal raw and unfiltered. Her desire to press up against Sabine, close enough and long enough to catalog the changing of her colors through every visible hue. Her desire to feel the echoes of sensation that would spill over through the Tether if Hannibal were to caress the supple plane of Will's neck. And most intimate of all: her desire for Hannibal to run a gentle finger down Sabine's spine, leaving behind a kaleidoscopic trail of color, while Will combs his fingers through her dark feathers.

Even just imagining it leaves Hannibal's throat suddenly dry and his nerves alight with phantom sensation. *Hard to be alarmed when the reward to the risk is so sweet,* Aušrinė murmurs.

As always, his daemon makes an excellent point.

His reverie is interrupted by the sound of Will scoffing. The display on Dust accumulation has an interactive component - several sets of glasses fitted with Rusakov-filtered lenses attached by curling plastic cords to a metal holder welded to the wall. Above the metal holder is a set of pictures showing Dust accumulation on the bodies of different people in different life stages. The first, a newborn baby, is completely devoid of Dust - just a little blue silhouette contrasted against the bright full-body glow of their parent. In the next picture, the glow of Dust has begun to appear on the face and hands of a four year old child. Throughout childhood, the glow increases slowly and steadily until, suddenly, in a photo labelled "One Day After Settling", the amount of Dust on the body has skyrocketed literally overnight.

"This display wasn't here when I visited before," Will says as he takes one of the glasses. He holds it up, squinting at the lights overhead through the lens. "Just as I thought. A single thick lens. You want two thinner lenses refracting light together to be able to see individual grains of Dust. These ancient things will just give an imprecise glow."

Hannibal steps closer to the display, picking up one of the other glasses and turning it over in his hands curiously. "I imagine the materials you work with at the FBI are too expensive to be wired to a wall in a museum."

Will laughs. "You imagine correctly," he says. "Too fragile, too. These old things can handle grubby fingerprints and a drop to the floor."

As Hannibal lowers the glasses over his eyes, he catches Will's expression turn brittle for just a moment. As soon as Hannibal's vision adjusts to the sapphire cast of the lenses, he can see why.

Dust is drawn to art, he remembers Will saying a few days ago. With that in mind, he had expected Will to glow like the sun on a cloudless summer day. Bright enough to burn. But the Omega has an unusually dim all-over glow, most of it concentrated over his hands and the bright little spot through Will's pocket where Sabine sits curled against his chest.

"It has its advantages," Will says, his silhouette crossing its arms over its chest, covering Sabine. "It's why I started specializing in Dust when I got into forensic daemonology and

profiling. Very little chance of interfering with results when I attract little of it myself."

"I wasn't expecting it," Hannibal admits, removing the glasses. "I've been to your home. You have a piano-"

"That I never play."

"- and your lures are exquisitely crafted. You possess skill and artistry"

Will shrugs. "I guess Dust doesn't care about lures. Maybe it thinks I'm not living up to my own potential. Maybe it's disappointed in me, angry on behalf of the neglected piano. We understand very little about Dust, all things considered," he says, removing his own set of glasses and grabbing a set of the Rusakov-filtered glasses. He places them over his eyes and turns to face Hannibal.

"How do we look?" Aušrinė asks.

Will stares for a moment before removing the glasses. "Blinding," he says, fumbling for his own glasses. "Standing room only for Dust."

It isn't delivered as a compliment, more like a straight matter of fact. Moreover, if it had been a compliment, it would imply that there was something wrong or undesirable or lesser about Will's own relative lack of Dust. Hannibal chooses not to comment on it, though the words do echo through the chambers of his heart.

They move on from the Dust exhibit to the final display before the guarded stairs that lead down to the age restricted portion of the museum. On a large screen affixed to the wall, an educational film about the emotions people have about settling is well under way. There are several long wooden benches set in front of the screen, but they're full with children and young teenagers and their guardians. Some of the youngest children aren't paying close attention, their daemons wrestling playfully with each other on the floor between the benches.

"For those of you here today who are under ten years old, the idea of settling may sound boring or maybe even a little scary," says a soothing female voice as footage a child running in a field plays on the screen. Her daemon takes on many different forms as she plays, from a loping gazelle, to a fluttering parakeet, to a spaniel rolling in the high grass. "That's normal. You're at an age of exploration and growth."

The footage changes to a boy in his late teens as he finishes dressing for a formal event like a school dance. He frowns slightly as his daemon changes from form to form trying to find something to fit the look, first a tawny chipmunk, then an ashy chinchilla, then a sleek golden Abyssinian cat.

"But those of you who are only a couple of years away from the day you will settle and present may already be feeling the ache to feel complete," says the narrator. "To know that although you will continue to grow and change throughout your life, you will have one solid, unshakeable foundation to your identity."

Will scoffs loud enough that one of the fathers on the bench nearest them turns and shushes him loudly. Hannibal considers asking the man for his name, but chooses to continue following Will to the stairs.

The guard checks their wristbands and allows them access to the stairwell. Once the door is closed behind them, Will erupts.

"That's exactly the type of unrealistic garbage that makes so many people feel alienated and helpless in our society," Will growls. "A pretty little lie where everyone settles happily and 'normally'."

"It is rather irresponsible to suggest to unsettled children that everyone ends up satisfied with how their daemon settles," Hannibal agrees. "My list of patients would be a fraction of its size if that were true."

"Yeah, I bet," Will mutters.

For a few seconds, the only sound is the echoing of their steps in the stairwell. Then, with some of the anger in his voice simmered down to a low, bitter boil, Will asks, "You had a traumatic settling. Have you ever felt that 'solid, unshakeable foundation' to your identity that the video promised?"

"Yes," Aušrinė answers for Hannibal. "But it took us several years and required traveling thousands of miles from home to find it."

"And yourself?" Hannibal asks.

Will doesn't answer. But softly, barely audible over the sound of their echoing steps, Hannibal hears Sabine's quiet, raspy voice say, "Not once."

They are silent the last few steps to the basement level.

In sharp contrast to the colorful, interactive displays above, the style of the age restricted portion of the museum is grave and clinical. There are no bright, hopeful videos to watch or fun Dust-illuminating glasses to play around with. It's all ominous medical equipment preserved behind pristine glass, all harrowing photographs lit up by stark spotlights.

As expected, the history of intercision is a big feature of the age-restricted level. There are hieroglyphics, statues, and centuries-old paintings showing the crudest form of the procedure as a means of capital punishment, typically a person being restrained while their daemon is thrown off a nearby cliff. This would naturally be fatal in nearly all circumstances, though there is one tableau painting called *The Separation of the Criminal* showing a Roman Alpha man in chains surviving the ripping of his Tether when his cat daemon landed on her feet after being thrown off of a high pillar. The criminal's eyes are rolled back in his head, his teeth grinding together so hard that bloody foam spills from the corners of his lips.

It's far from the Tether-lengthening rite that Hannibal and Witches the world over endure. The presence of strange magic in the lands where daemons cannot tread rewards the hardy and determined with an unlimited, strengthened Tether.

There is a specimen of the first major innovation in the realm of intercision safely mounted within one of the glass display units. Despite being nearly 200 years old, the Maystadt scalpel gleams as if it were just produced the day before. Made of a manganese-titanium alloy that was discovered to be capable of severing Tethers when a sheet of the material used in a construction project in London had fallen between a laborer and his daemon, resulting in a much faster - and more survivable - severing.

This discovery marked the part of medical and psychological history that Hannibal was quite familiar with: an age of breakneck advancement brought forth under the banner of 'charity'. When the procedure was introduced to 'treat' the mentally ill, those with irregular daemons, and the societally inconvenient.

"Hard to believe it was ever considered merciful," Will mutters to Hannibal as they gaze at the light gleaming off the edge of the Maystadt scalpel.

"If there's one thing we as a species are good at it's convincing ourselves our actions are justified even if they are unquestionably horrific."

There are countless photographs of people who endured government-sanctioned rehabilitative intercision, ranging from the late 1800s to the mid-1940s, when the practice rapidly fell out of favor and intercision lingered on only as an option for capital punishment. Over sixty years where completely innocent people ran the risk of having their souls cut off from them for the flimsiest reasons imaginable.

Will stops in front of one photograph. The subject is an Omega man in his mid-20s. His hair is long and unkempt, and he is almost skeletally thin beneath his rough, baggy clothes. His eyes are completely vacant and his mouth hangs slightly open. His albino boa constrictor daemon droops listlessly across his shoulders, her eyes equally blank. A plaque beneath the picture reads: "A. Brewster, 26. Arrested for vagrancy, poverty, daemon irregularity, moral decrepitude unbefitting of an Omega. Intercised May 11, 1910. Died June 30, 1910."

Had he been born decades earlier, it is certain that Will would have met a similar fate to the unfortunate Mr. Brewster. As Will stares at the tragic reflection of what could have easily been his own fate, Hannibal reaches out and softly places his hand on Will's shoulder in a small gesture of comfort. Will's muscles flinch slightly beneath his hand, but the Onega does not brush Hannibal's hand away. He relaxes slightly, saying nothing.

Eventually, they move toward the item of the collection that is most relevant to Will's goal of understanding Abel Gideon's mindset.

"A silver guillotine," Will says, his voice raw with emotion. "The last few decades that intercision was used for corporal punishment, this is how they did it."

The device is large and composed of polished metal. It consists of a control panel filled with a variety of buttons and a prominent lever, as well as two cages which are spacious enough to hold at least two fully grown adults. A large, sharp blade hangs suspended above the point where the two cages connect.

"Much as certain politicians would like to bring these back into style, almost all of the ones we had here in the states have been scrapped. As far as I know, there are only two complete guillotines left in the US: this one and one in the home of a multi-millionaire collector in Delaware," Will says, his eyes never leaving the blade.

"Are either of them operational?" Hannibal asks.

"Probably not this one," Will says. "But the collector's? Wouldn't be surprised if it still works just as a tasteless parlor trick. Everyone sit back, sip your drinks, and watch the blade fall."

Hannibal watches with keen interest as Will moves around the silver guillotine. The Omega stands in front of one of the cages, positioning himself so he can look down past the glass enclosure through the mesh to the end of the opposite cage. His eyes flutter shut, his vivid and beautiful imagination hidden away from Hannibal's fascinated observation.

After a few moments, Will's eyes snap open. His chest rises and falls with ragged breaths, and he wipes at the fine droplets of sweat that had formed on his brow. His wide, blue eyes meet Hannibal's, and the message is clear in his dilated pupils: *We need to leave.*

As they head back upstairs, Will doesn't volunteer any of the thoughts he had while examining the silver guillotine. Hannibal watches Will closely as they climb the stairs, noting the small tremble in Will's hand as it grips the railing. He seems even more rattled than usual, so if Hannibal had to guess what Will imagined, it would probably be that Will had very viscerally felt what it would be like to be wide awake with Sabine caged in front of him and a nightmare of a blade looming overhead.

"I need a minute. Sorry," Will says as they approach the restrooms. Will darts into the Omegas' room before Hannibal can tell him he has nothing to apologize for.

While waiting for Will to collect himself, Hannibal reaches into his pocket to check his phone. He has received a few emails during his outing with Will, most of them from colleagues seeking to schedule meetings. They can wait until he has finished spending his time with Will. One, however, draws his attention immediately. The subject line reads "The Voice of Many Waters".

I hope this message finds you well, the email reads. *I realize you posted your inquiry to the forum several weeks ago, so I apologize if you have already been able to acquire a copy of the book. If you have not, I do have an offer for you.*

I'm a Parisian collector and seller of rare and unusual books. Unfortunately, I don't have a copy of the book in English, but I now find myself with a second copy of the novel's French translation. A friend of mine willed it to me along with the rest of his collection when he passed away a few weeks ago. I'll be keeping his copy, but I'm willing to part with the copy I had already owned. I do enjoy trades, so if you are interested, you can send me a list of books you'd be willing to trade for it and we can make arrangements from there. I have attached a picture of the book so you can see its overall level of preservation. Otherwise, we can discuss payment options. Again, I do apologize that it isn't in the original language.

Sincerely,
Lambert Delacroix

Hannibal had received a few messages after posting his search for *The Voice of Many Waters*, most of them sympathetic warnings that he'd probably be looking for a while. It had been a small printing to begin with, created in the flimsy and ephemeral paperback fashion of its day, and so there were nearly no copies in active circulation. Perhaps Mr. Delacroix's offer wouldn't mean much to those who only spoke English, but for Hannibal it is a perfect opportunity.

He types out a quick message of interest in French, thanks Mr. Delacroix, and explains that he will be in touch with a list of possible trades as soon as he is back home.

Shortly after sending the response, Will emerges from the restroom. He isn't shaking anymore, but his skin is particularly pale. The whites of his eyes are slightly pink from crying. The Omega's expression makes it obvious that he does not want to talk about what has impacted him so.

Outside, the rain pours down heavily. Will sighs. "Bet this means delays at the train station."

"I could drive you to where your car is parked in DC," Hannibal offers.

"It'd be out of your way. DC is past Baltimore."

"I don't mind the excursion. And it's a Saturday, after all," Hannibal says, smiling as he echoes Will's words from earlier in the day.

Will looks uncertain. "What I saw in front of the silver guillotine… what I felt…" he begins hesitantly. He swallows. "I won't be a fun road trip partner."

"At some point, Will, you're going to have to accept that we simply enjoy your company," Aušrinė says. "Both you and Sabine."

Will stares at Hannibal's daemon, and at least her provocative statement has made some of the color return to Will's cheeks.

"Sure," he mumbles, barely audible over the rain.

By moving quickly and ducking under overhangs wherever possible, they manage to avoid getting completely drenched on their way to the parking garage where Hannibal has left his car. Will is quiet as they crawl through the rain-delayed traffic leading out of Philadelphia. He stares out at the streets as the season's first chilly rain continues to pour down around them.

Hannibal does not mind the silence. It's pensive but not awkward, and he enjoys the simple pleasure of sharing the same space and oxygen as Will.

About an hour into the drive, Will's phone buzzes in his coat pocket. On the third buzz with no answer, Hannibal realizes that Will has fallen asleep, possibly lulled by the quiet sounds of the rain against the car, the regular pattern of the windshield wipers, and the low classical

music Hannibal has been playing. Possibly exhausted by the emotional hit he'd taken at the silver guillotine. Maybe the encephalitis playing havoc with his sleeping patterns.

Only a few minutes after the first call, Will's phone buzzes again. Either a very persistent telemarketer or something very important. When Will's phone goes to voicemail for the second time, Hannibal's own phone begins to vibrate almost immediately thereafter.

Hannibal pulls out his phone and looks at the caller ID.

"Good evening, Jack," he says as he taps the answer button.

"Do you know where Will is? He isn't answering his phone."

"Yes. He's with me."

"And why is that?"

"He was shaken up by Abel Gideon's request for intercision. We went to see the silver guillotine in the Philadelphia Museum of Daemonology to help him process it. It took a lot out of Will, so he's sleeping while I drive us back to DC."

"Make it Quantico."

"Has something happened?"

"Oh, it's more than just 'something'," Jack growls. "Wake Will up and hand him the phone."

Hannibal frowns. "Whatever is going on, Jack, it sounds like you'll want Will to be refreshed to handle it. I recommend letting him rest until we get to Quantico."

Jack sighs, and when he next speaks, he sounds like he is fighting to rein in his frustration. "You might be right about that, but we have to act fast. Abel Gideon has escaped. Not only is he a killer on the loose, but if it gets out to people like Freddie Lounds that we're investigating him as a person of interest in the Chesapeake Ripper case, we're going to have mass hysteria on our hands."

"We'll be there as fast as we can."

"Whatever that is, aim for half an hour faster."

Hannibal puts the phone away and looks over to Will, curled up into himself as he sleeps. His dark eyebrows are furrowed and his eyelashes flutter as his eyes dart wildly from side to side beneath his lids. Whatever he's dreaming of, it isn't pleasant.

Giving in to temptation, Hannibal reaches out and runs the back of his hand gently across Will's warm forehead. Will murmurs something indecipherable, but his sleeping face relaxes slightly.

Hannibal reduces the car's speed by 10 miles per hour. He is in no rush to get to Quantico.

A Fever

Chapter Notes

> Oops, I did that thing I do sometimes where I realize everything I want to happen in a chapter is WAY TOO MUCH to happen in one chapter. So I moved a few things around and chopped it in half. As a result, the title of this chapter is NOT what I said it would be last time (A Husk) and is instead A Fever! A Husk will be for next time.
>
> Sorry it took me a while to get this one out. I had several weeks in a brain funk which impacted both my speed of writing and my ability to feel good with what I HAD already written. I'm doing a bit better now and hoping to make the best of that. You can find updates on delays and other things on my twitter (@rosenritter42).
>
> Here are the notes from the last chapter, and I'll see you all as soon as possible for the ACTUAL "A Husk" chapter.

Will scowls, exhaustion clinging to his bones. His sense of time is completely haywire after falling asleep in Hannibal's car. Just thinking about his accidental nap has Sabine embarrassed and groaning miserably across their Tether.

Normally Will has trouble falling asleep, shocked awake by nightmares or glaring into the heavy, still dark as his racing mind chases away sleep. He certainly isn't used to letting his guard down around others enough to sleep in their presence. Even in college, before he scared off his one and only roommate, he never dared to sleep at the same time as him and his daemon. And yet he had somehow become comfortable enough to have fallen asleep in the passenger seat of an unbonded Alpha, the most suspicious type of person there is.

Will glances over to Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. He doesn't have to be here, stuck in Chilton's office with Will and Jack. He could have dropped Will off at Quantico and been on his way. He had already spent so much of his limited weekend time on Will's behalf already, and Will is very keenly aware that many Alphas would use that for nefarious purposes. Offer a favor, expect repayment with interest. And there's only one type of currency an Alpha with that kind of mindset is interested in.

But not Hannibal. At first, Will was sure that was his game as well, albeit cloaked in a particularly convincing disguise of old-fashioned, Old World chivalry. Now, however, Will realizes that there's nothing at all "old-fashioned" in the way that Hannibal conducts himself socially. An old-fashioned Alpha would never allow his daemon to speak directly to an Omega he was not bonded to. An old-fashioned Alpha would never hang on an Omega's darker, more cynical words and respect his view of the world. An old-fashioned Alpha would chide and chip away at all the little imperfections of personality and preference that keep Will from being a sweet and delicate old-fashioned Omega.

Will isn't sure what to make of it, so he turns his tired mind to the matter at hand. He can ponder Lecter later.

The storm has followed them south from Philadelphia and has settled in for the night over Baltimore. Frederick Chilton stands fretting by the window that overlooks the courtyard, flinching with every bolt of lightning as if expecting to see Abel Gideon lurking outside with each flash. Chilton's daemon, a rooster by the name of Daedalus, paces to and fro across the office's ornate desk, his long tail feathers trailing behind him as he goes.

An impractical shape, Sabine muses as Will watches the rooster. *Features exaggerated to impress aesthetically but not to serve any actual useful function. With feathers that long, you can't hide without being spotted or run without tripping over yourself.*

Will considers arguing with her that not everything has to be a survival strategy, but it's a weak response and he knows it. She's right. All of Chilton's preening cockiness from a few days ago, that artificial haughtiness that some Betas cultivate when they resent that they did not present as Alpha, is gone. If he truly understood the need for caution and discretion that his job requires, he wouldn't be in this mess. There probably isn't a shred of common sense practicality in Frederick Chilton at all.

"Has Gideon ever mentioned any specific locations during his sessions with you?" Jack asks. "Something familiar to run away to?"

"In case you've forgotten, Agent Crawford, Abel Gideon killed what was familiar to him over dry turkey and under-salted stuffing. Even if he did have someone to run to, he wouldn't take the opportunity," Chilton says, his hand trembling as it rests against the windowsill. "Gideon doesn't care about freedom. You heard him the other day. He wants oblivion. And he wants to drag me there with him."

"Why would he want that?" Hannibal asks. It's the kind of seemingly-obvious question that serves as a cornerstone of his profession. There's the obvious answer, that of course Gideon would want revenge against the person who was essentially his jailer, but there is the not at all subtle suggestion of there being *more*.

Will watches as Chilton's fingers curl into a fist against the windowsill as he registers Hannibal's implication. It's his profession too, after all. At first, Will suspects Chilton will deflect or refuse to answer, but after a long pause, Chilton does reply.

"It wasn't intentional," he says.

"*What* wasn't intentional?" Jack asks, clearly in no mood for obscurities. Themis takes a few steps toward Chilton, glowering at him.

Chilton's eyes dart from Jack to Themis and back again. A huge clap of thunder outside rattles the window, and he recoils from it in reflexive fear. He drifts away from the window and collapses heavily into the luxurious chair behind his desk. Daedalus hops off of the desk and onto his human's lap.

"Well?" Jack insists.

"I didn't knowingly and falsely convince Gideon that he was the Chesapeake Ripper," Chilton says, running his fingers through Daedalus's feathers. "I merely deduced that Gideon matched many of the qualities in the Ripper profile and decided to investigate that via therapy. He certainly took quickly to the idea. Virtually no prodding on my part. Forgive me for showing some initiative considering the FBI has been stalled on the Ripper case for years."

"So you fumbled around in his mind, tossing open drawers and sloppily rifling through the contents until you had little more than a chaotic mess on your hands. Gideon killed his mate and her family in a classic display of explosive rage, nothing even remotely like the Ripper's carefully choreographed brand. If he had just been locked up and not meddled with, he probably would have been a perfectly banal inmate. Now a nurse is dead through no fault of her own, and he's out there with a chip on his shoulder and you with a target on your back," Will says, noticing how Chilton pales with every word. "Incompetence isn't the rock-solid alibi you seem to think it is. Assuming you're even telling the truth about your motives."

At the very least, Chilton has the decency to look abashed, but it's in such a pitiful expression that Will can nearly taste it on his tongue. Simultaneously cloyingly sweet and sour, like a cheap lemon drop. Will looks away, and his eyes land on Hannibal and Aušrinė. As always, the Alpha's expression is strangely difficult for Will to read, but there is a definite glimmer of approval in his eyes as he looks back at Will. Will averts his gaze again, deciding that his shoes have the least amount of baggage in the room.

"Fine," Chilton says. His voice cracks slightly midway through the word, and he clears his throat to cover it. "You've made your point. But whatever mistakes I've made to get into this predicament aren't deserving of a death sentence. Which is exactly what I'll get if you don't handle this situation quickly."

"We've got agents and police officers out searching for him," Jack says. "I'm ready to send out more, but first you need to tell me something and you need to be truthful about it."

"What?"

Jack moves to stand in front of Chilton's desk. He places his broad hands against the polished wood and leans forward. Chilton, in perfect terrified sync, pushes back into his chair as Jack moves forward.

"Did you tell any press that you suspected Gideon was the Ripper?" Jack asks gravely.

"N-no, not at all."

Jack drums his fingers against the desk. "As much as I hate to say it, Freddie Lounds counts as press."

Chilton wilts into his seat. "I may have informed Ms. Lounds that I had something interesting to tell her," he admits. As Jack's glare intensifies, Chilton holds up his hands in surrender and continues, "But I didn't tell her what it was! I just made an appointment with her!"

"Well, appointment's cancelled," Will mutters.

Daedalus puffs up his feathers indignantly, as if he is just on the edge of scoffing at the obviousness of Will's words, but the rooster daemon holds himself back.

Guess he has some small kernel of self-preservation, then, Sabine huffs.

"Good," Jack says. "It's already going to be a nightmare to alert the media about Gideon. If you had prematurely squawked about him being the Ripper, it would be Hell on Earth. How's your security set up at home?" Jack asks.

"Top of the line," Chilton replies. "Perk of the job."

"If we gave you guards, would you feel comfortable staying at home?"

Chilton shakes his head with a small disbelieving laugh. "I won't feel comfortable staying anywhere until Abel Gideon is in a windowless room three stories beneath the Earth in a supermax prison. Or, preferably, dead," he says.

He reaches up to run a shaking hand through his hair. "But I will admit that your suggestion is a decent start."

We're wasting time, Sabine groans. *While Jack is placating Chilton, Gideon is expanding his lead. What we really need to know is-*

"How did he escape?" Hannibal asks, and Will jolts slightly at hearing the very thing Sabine had been preparing to grouse about spoken out loud. "It's a question you'll be hearing quite a bit over the next few days, I'm afraid."

"I wish I could say it was something as simple as him slipping through his cuffs while in transit," Chilton says. "But unfortunately, he may have had some help. A trail of security cameras in the facility were shut off. Every single one ranging from his cell to the exit for deliveries."

"Any staff irregularities?" Will asks. "Anyone call in sick or fail to show up for their shifts around the same time?"

Chilton looks frozen in place for a moment before he averts his gaze. He takes in a deep breath through his nose and releases it gingerly. "I," he begins, his voice slightly strangled, "have been slightly distracted for the past few days arranging meetings with peers in my field who have had the displeasure of interviewing Gideon to discuss the tantalizing prospect of the Chesapeake Ripper already being my custody. So, as a possible result, some procedures and oversight may have, hypothetically, gotten a little lax. Theoretically speaking."

"Oh my God," Jack grumbles, shutting his eyes tight and rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "Frederick-"

"I know! I know," Chilton exclaims. "And I'm prepared for the repercussions of that. Censure from multiple state and federal agencies, a black eye to my otherwise brilliantly stellar reputation, and possibly even a pay cut."

He'll be lucky if whatever's coming to him is that bland. That's what he gets for counting his chickens before they hatch, Sabine thinks, chuckling bitterly at her own bad joke.

We've been around Hannibal and Aušrinė for too long today, Will replies, frowning to himself. *That's their caliber of joke.*

"Great. Just great," Jack sighs, shaking his head. He turns to Will. His expression is commanding. "This means we're going to have to split our resources. We'll need agents out in the field following tips and working with local police in the search for Gideon as well as people inside the BSHCI trying to figure out the escape method and making sure that none of the other prisoners can replicate it."

"I'll go wherever I'm needed, Jack," Will says, but it's more of a tired declaration of fact than anything close to enthusiasm. He's never been much of a true go-getter, all bright-eyed and eager like the tales he's heard about Miriam Lass. He wonders if he's always been a bit too grim and fatalistic for that.

Jack will put him wherever he needs him to go. If that means he's pulled in many different directions at once, like a doll whose limbs are in the grubby little hands of two arguing children, so be it. Pull and pull until it snaps and breaks, and then nobody gets to play with it.

The thought sends a chill through Will's body. All he can do is hope that Gideon gets caught before things get to that point. Given that he can already feel some of the stress fractures running through him, the last thing he needs is even more internal and external pressure.

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As Will stares down Gideon's first victim in the mere twelve hours since his escape, he berates himself for being foolish enough to think that the universe would be kind enough to make things simple for him even once. It never has before, so it was ridiculous to assume it would start now.

Dr. Carson Nhan's dark eyes stare at Will, unseeing and cloudy. His daemon, which Will only knows was a black-crested gibbon from Nhan's driver's license, is long gone. Preliminary screening of the crime scene using a Rusakov filter has revealed almost no Dust left on Nhan's body, so at least she did not linger.

There are two things that identify Nhan's murder as the work of Gideon, and one of them is that very lack of Dust. Even if Nhan and his daemon died simultaneously, the level of craft that the Ripper puts into his work would draw in ambient Dust.

The second is that, just like the nurse killed in the BSHCI, Nhan's body has been staged in a rough copy of a prior Ripper murder.

A large, ornate Bible lies open on Nhan's desk with his removed tongue placed gently against the page as a marker. The rest of Nhan sits in his chair at the desk, posed as if he is closely examining the contents of the good book.

It's unreasonably warm in Nhan's office, and it's making sweat prickle on Will's brow and seep through his scalp. He brushes some of the sweat away, taking care not to get any of it near any evidence, but there's already more coming to take its place. Even as hot and uncomfortable as he is, it's not enough to draw Sabine out from the pocket where she usually lurks. Maybe she'd crawl out into the open air if they were alone together with only Dr. Nhan's corpse for company, but as it stands, she chooses to remain hidden and sweltering.

"Even for Gideon this is a bad imitation," Will says. "The man that the Ripper killed this way was a particularly slimy up-and-coming preacher in the bloated, plaque-riddled vein of 'prosperity gospel' evangelicalism. His tongue marked a passage in the Book of Matthew where Jesus chased profiteers out of the temple."

He turns toward the wall behind Nhan's desk. His various diplomas from highly respected institutions are displayed prominently, but Will is focused only on a small personal photograph. He reaches for it and traces his fingertips against the oak frame. Frozen in time, the psychiatrist and members of his family smile in front of one of the DC area's Vietnamese temples. "Dr. Nhan was a practicing Buddhist," Will says. "Mangled semiotics. The whole point of the Ripper's original kill is lost."

"Almost sounds like you admire what the Ripper did to that phony preacher," Zeller says as he pushes past Will to photograph the open Bible. Líadan weaves expertly around his feet, her ringed tail puffed up in irritation.

"The Ripper thinks what he does is admirable. If Will's empathy and ability to visit that mindset is what we need to catch him, then so be it," Jack says. He gives Will a meaningful look out of the corner of his eye. "As long as it is just a visit."

Will nods slowly, processing the mixed-message defense as he mops at more sweat gathering on his brow.

"Hey, are you feeling okay?" Beverly asks, frowning at Will. "You look sweaty."

"It's just really hot in here," Will says, pulling himself further away from them until his shoulders bump against the wall.

"Not really," Price says. He taps at the thermostat with one gloved hand. "The room is set to 65. Looks like Dr. Nhan liked to stay cool as a cucumber. Not the most eco-conscious choice, but I can't say I don't understand the appeal."

"It's not your… y'know. Time?" Zeller asks, wincing as he makes a strange wiggling hand gesture that should be absolutely meaningless, but tragically, Will knows exactly what he's asking.

"I have a suppressant implant. I'm good for almost another year," Will mutters. As if he weren't hot enough already, he can feel a miserable blush heating up around his ears and cheeks. "I run hot anyway, and it's just a slight fever exacerbating things. Stress."

"You're sure?" Jack asks. Maybe it's only concern in his voice, but something about his tone rankles Will.

"I know my own body, Jack," Will snaps. The others stare back at him, and the doubt Will sees in each of their eyes bothers him more than the sweltering heat. "What does the Bible passage say?"

"I thought you said this was just a thoughtless replica of a Ripper kill," Price says, and if anyone at this awful, sweltering crime scene had to say something like that to him, Will's glad it was Price. At least he sounds like he's genuinely trying to catch up, and not second guess him or undermine his assessment.

"I didn't say that," Will says with no bite to his words. "Even though the rebuke that's present in the original Ripper kill is absent here, that doesn't mean that Gideon isn't trying to say something."

"Bet it's just one of those chapters that's all just one 'So-and-So begat So-and-So' after another. That's, what, a good 20% of the Bible?" Zeller muses as he leans in over the book. He clears his throat and begins to read.

"The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?'" Zeller recites. "It goes on like that for a while. Acts 22."

"Definitely not as random as one of those so-called begat chapters. But… could still just be meaningless," Beverly says, her voice uncertain.

Jack scowls down at the Bible before looking to Will for his input.

Will shrugs, shaking his head. "Hard to say. There's anger in the verses, certainly, but Nhan wasn't flogged. It's difficult to even tell if Gideon is comparing Nhan to Paul or himself to Paul. Assuming we're supposed to make a comparison at all. It's messy. The avenues for interpretation are too wide, too covered in weeds."

It's clear from his sour expression that Jack doesn't like that response at all. He looks down at Themis, and Will can see through the subtle muscle movements in Jack's brow and mouth that he and his daemon are deliberating something.

After a moment, Jack sighs. "Go home, Will."

"But-"

"No buts," Jack says. "If you're coming down with something, you need to rest. We'll finish evaluating the crime scene and take Nhan to the morgue for autopsy. We don't need you for that."

Will hesitates, looking to Price, Zeller, and Beverly, though even he isn’t sure what he’s hoping to accomplish by doing so. He doesn’t expect or even necessarily want any of them to

stand up to Jack and insist that he stay at the scene, but he also doesn't want the reaction that he actually gets. None of them can meet his eyes, all suddenly and conspicuously busy examining parts of the body and crime scene that they had already covered.

Forget it, Sabine sighs. *Let's just go.*

"Right. You're right," Will says wearily. It's unclear even to himself if he's just replying to Jack or to Sabine or to both at once. As he moves past the forensic team and other members of the police and FBI, he supposes that it doesn't really matter,

The late afternoon outside of Nhan's office is crisp and cold, the temperature having dropped a good fifteen degrees with the storm on Saturday. After how hot he felt in Nhan's office, the cold air shocks the sweat still clinging to Will's skin, and he rushes to his car. The whole drive back to Wolf Trap, Will fiddles with the air conditioning in his car. Sometimes too cold, sometimes too hot, sometimes rolling down the window and feeling the chilly air running through his sweat-dampened hair like the skeletal fingers of Death. About ten minutes from home, the red autumn sun sets on Will Graham.

The dogs greet him with wagging tails and uncomplicated, slobbering joy when Will arrives home. For a few minutes, he and Sabine just lie on the floor of their little house, laughing as the dogs frolic around them, hitting them with their wagging tails and licking the salt that the sweat has left on Will's arms.

Soon, the newest dog, Winston - who Will is quickly realizing is his smartest and most responsible dog by far - nudges at Will's side insistently as if to say that the fun and games are nice, but Will has important things to do. Important things like feeding the dogs and himself.

"I know, buddy," Will says warmly as he sits up. The other dogs all compete to be the one who can occupy his lap. "Thanks for the reminder."

As the dogs eat, he opens a can of chicken noodle soup for himself. He doesn't think it will do anything to impact the cold or whatever it is that he's fighting, especially since it's not really the ingredients of the soup itself but the love and care of the person serving it that makes a difference in the healing process. And as Will stands alone in his kitchen watching the bowl in the microwave spin, he is keenly aware that when he serves himself this sad meal, there won't be a drop of love in it.

The microwave beeps, and Will almost burns his hand removing the bowl. He gives it a few minutes to cool down, taking the opportunity to spread out some of his notes on the Gideon situation across the table.

The soup is nearly flavorless on his tongue, and so therefore easy to ignore completely. His mind gives in to the hazy distraction of his fever as he eats, his eyes drifting over the pages before him. The details of Gideon's murder of his mate and her family, some heavily redacted and therefore completely worthless transcripts from Chilton, excerpts of opinions from psychiatrists who had interviewed Gideon (Alana Bloom, Paul Carruthers, Carson Nhan), the long list of employees at the BSHCI-

Will's phone buzzes, shocking him out of his intense focus. His soup is only half-finished and stone cold. When he picks up his phone to see who is calling him, the clock reveals that nearly an hour has passed since he sat down at his table. His fingers tremble as he holds the phone. The name in the caller ID says 'Dr. Lecter'.

"Hello?" Will answers, hoping that he is keeping the unease out of his voice.

"Good evening, Will. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Just… ah, just some bad canned soup."

Hannibal is silent for a moment, and Will can easily imagine the extremely understated expression of disgust that must be settling across the Alpha's distinguished features. "I'm sorry to hear it," he says. "I would have gladly prepared something for you to spare you from that."

"You can't just cook every meal for me."

"Agree to disagree."

Will laughs despite himself, the sound startled out of him. "Why are you calling me?" he asks. As soon as the words are out, he winces and continues, "Sorry. That was ruder than I meant it to sound. I've been hazy all day. Feverish. Probably caught something from one of the kids at the museum. You were there at the same time… have you had any symptoms?"

"No, I'm afraid I've been healthy as ever. Have you gone to a doctor?"

"It's not that serious," Will grumbles, running his free hand down his face.

"You're an adult, Will. I trust you to make decisions for your own health that are right for you."

Will takes in a deep, shaking breath. "I think I needed to hear that."

"Anytime," Hannibal says warmly. "To answer your question: I'm calling to check in on how you're feeling about Gideon's escape. Though I admit, I thought you'd still be at poor Dr. Nhan's crime scene."

"Did Jack call to tell you about it?" Will asks, frowning.

"Unfortunately, I received the news from a much less reputable source."

"Tattle Crime," Will groans. "You read that dreck?"

"Now that I'm on good terms with someone who is likely to be slandered regularly by it, I feel honor-bound to keep abreast of Miss Lounds's antics."

"Well, don't inflict that misery on yourself on my account," Will says. He pauses, considering. "She found out about Nhan fast."

"She does seem to be getting exponentially bolder, yes," Hannibal muses. "But considering how few details she included in her article, I think she only has a rough, preliminary idea of what has happened. Perhaps she wanted to get ahead of the story, speculate about Gideon's newest crime while she has the attention of everyone in the Chesapeake Bay area."

"Probably," Will murmurs. "She definitely would have had plenty of material to sensationalize if she knew more. It was another Ripper imitation."

"Oh? Which one?"

"It was a replica of one of his earlier kills, so I'm not sure if you'd have heard of it."

"You forget that I've lived in Baltimore for over twenty years. I pre-date the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal says.

"True," Will sighs. "It was the one with the tongue in the Bible. But it lacked all the purpose of the Ripper's original design. Even the page that the Bible was open to didn't really illuminate things."

"What was the chapter?"

"Acts 22."

"Ah, a chapter focused on Paul. If I recall correctly, it features him recounting his conversion and then his interrogation by Roman soldiers."

"Is there anything that you don't have immediate, effortless knowledge about?" Will grumbles.

"Fishing," Hannibal answers easily. "I've told you before that your lures are magnificent. I certainly couldn't produce something like them without a great deal of practice. I'm also largely unfamiliar with the particulars of fishing as an activity. Perhaps someday you could show me."

Will tries to imagine Hannibal - the most cultured, well-dressed, cosmopolitan Alpha that Will has ever seen - out in the middle of a stream, in the type of muddy and weather-beaten clothing that Will's brand of fishing requires. Tries to imagine Aušrinė being willing to perch on a floppy khaki bucket hat that is all function and no fashion. The concepts feel completely mutually exclusive, like oil and water failing to mix together.

Impossible, Sabine mutters across the Tether. She leaves it at that, plain and simple. If there's a pang of remorse in her thought, she would deny it vehemently.

"I-" Will says, but his words fade away. He clears his throat. "Maybe."

Perhaps Hannibal can sense his hesitation, his doubt, because he does not continue to push the subject. Instead, he says,"Well, I won't keep you from your rest any longer. You should get as much sleep as you can before whatever the next stage of Gideon's rampage entails. Thank you for indulging my desire to check in on you."

“No, I… I’m glad you did. It might have helped,” Will says.“I think.”

“That's good. Goodnight, Will.”

“'night.”

Will hangs up and sets his phone down atop the notes spread all over the table. Sabine steps toward him, her skin as pale and sickly as he feels. She doesn't need to tell him anything or even push her thoughts through the Tether.

He sighs heavily, and when he stands up the blood rushes to his head. He rubs at his temples, which are warm and damp with fever and sweat. "Let's just go to bed," he says.

*****

Sleep comes easily to Will that night, but having it stay is another matter entirely.

He drops into a deep, dreamless sleep only moments after crawling into bed, but the longest he goes without waking up is a meager hour and a half. All through the night, he finds himself shuddering awake, alternately feeling as if his skin is freezing and his blood boiling. Just after 4 AM, he gives up on trying to get any more sleep and hauls himself out of bed.

After feeding the dogs, Will lets them out to relieve themselves and run around in the low pre-dawn fog. He sips his coffee while watching them, trying to decide if he feels better compared to the feverish mess he was yesterday or not.

“It shouldn’t be this difficult to tell,” Sabine mutters from atop his shoulder.

“Mm. Shouldn’t.”

Sabine sighs heavily. “I guess one advantage to being up this damn early is that we can have a hot shower so long that it uses up all of the warm water for the rest of the week.”

Will corrals the dogs back inside, and as soon as they’re all accounted for, he heads to the bathroom. He peels off his sweat-dampened night shirt and boxers and tosses them into a sad heap by the bathroom door. Once the water is suitably hot, he enters the tub and stands still beneath the spray, letting the water wash over him. He stares down at the drain, imagining that all of the stress and sickness running through his system is a physical grime sticking to his skin and that it is now peeling off and away from him. He sees something dark and inky slough off his skin and slowly ooze toward the drain, but when he blinks the uncanny vision is gone.

He goes through the motions of cleaning himself, lathering up his cheap shampoo in his curly hair. A bit of the lather gets into his eyes, and he winces. While trying to blink away the stinging soap, he catches the dark blurred shape of Sabine as she perches on top of the shower rod. She peers out towards the door as if on watch for any interlopers, a habit she picked up when they lived in the dorms in university which she had never bothered to shake.

With the shampoo cleared away, he returns his attention back to his shower. He finishes scrubbing his chest and lowers his hand to wash over his abdomen, but he freezes as an

unwanted memory from the Nhan crime scene flashes into his head: Zeller asking if his fever was due to possible Heat.

At the time, he had needed to put up a front of unshakeable confidence. Give Betas or, even worse, Alphas an opportunity to doubt an Omega's expertise in their own body's functions and Will has found that they will take that opportunity with gusto every time. But unfortunately, now that the suspicion is in his head, he finds that it's hard to shake off. Like a nagging fly buzzing in his ear that refuses to leave even when he bats it away.

He doesn't feel like he's in heat, but not even that is enough to sway the doubt. So he reaches down between his legs to touch the spot that he otherwise so purposefully neglects outside of washing himself and his awkward yearly checkups at an Omega clinic. He tells himself that it's just to assuage his completely unreasonable fear that his symptoms are heat-related, but he does not draw his hand away immediately when he feels that there's no more slick than usual for someone on long-term suppressants. Instead, he lingers there, his own touch so rare that it almost feels like that of a stranger.

Will has spent his whole life since he presented telling himself that he isn't ashamed of being an Omega, and sometimes he even believes it. There are plenty of aspects to Will's life where his empathy feels more like a burden than a blessing, and none of them cut as deeply and sharply as what he picks up from society when it comes to Omegas. It may not be as bad now as it was for prior generations of Omegas, but the grime of prejudice and dismissal is still alive and well in society. The sludge builds up in the dark corners of the soul, and sometimes the wretched muck bubbles up and spills out.

And so, when the tension mounts inside of him, this is why he typically favors his cock and tries to politely ignore his Omega anatomy to the best of his ability.

His fingers twist slightly against the sensitive flesh, and he bites his lip in response. He can vaguely feel Sabine's irritation reverberate through the Tether, but she does not intervene. His breathing begins to quicken as he continues to slowly rub himself. To keep himself from settling on any one potentially dangerous or embarrassing fantasy, he lets his mind drift. And unfortunately, what his mind lands on is a jumble of the information he's compiled about the Gideon case. He vaguely registers that this is dangerous territory, that pleasuring himself while his mind slides from data point to data point concerning serial murders could cause some really messed up connections to be formed.

He presses a bit deeper and suddenly his nerves are alight. At that same moment, the rapidly cycling thoughts about the case align - he sees the name "Paul Carruthers" in the list of psychiatrists who have questioned Abel Gideon at the same time that he remembers the deep timbre of Hannibal's accented voice the night before: "Ah, a chapter focused on Paul."

Will comes with a startled gasp, and he doesn't dare to dwell on the fact that it was the memory of Hannibal's warm voice in his ear that set him over the edge.

He lurches out of the tub, and the only thing that keeps him from tumbling to the floor of the bathroom is a quick, desperate grab at the shower curtain. He rips a few hooks away from the rod, but it's enough to slow his momentum.

Sabine leaps from the top of the rod, landing on his bare shoulder. She's berating him both out loud and through the Tether, but Will can't hear her chastising over his racing thoughts. Even though he lives alone with only an outrageous number of dogs to judge him, he slings a towel around his waist. With that, he dashes back to his bed where his phone lies charging on his dresser.

Jack picks up after six rings."What the hell, Will, it's not even five o'clock. This better be good, considering you woke up Bella after she finally felt well enough to sleep-"

"The Bible passage at the Nhan crime scene," Will interrupts, his breath still heavy. "It had intent, but it was a signpost, not a statement of motive. The chapter about the apostle Paul. It was meant to point us to Gideon's next victim: Paul Carruthers."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Will says insistently. "We need to get to Dr. Carruthers immediately. He's in danger."

"Alright," Jack says. "I'll get on it. How on earth did you make this connection so damn early?"

Will's throat goes dry, and he looks to Sabine, who is full-body crimson and glaring at him. "Uh," he says, swallowing nervously. "Just shower thoughts."

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When Dr. Carruthers can't be reached, Will knows that they're already too late. He arrives at Carruthers's opulent home in Bethesda, Maryland shortly before just before dawn, prepared for the worst. Two patrol cars block off the street around the house, and several officers stand posted to keep the early bird neighbors from getting too close. Per standard protocol, there's an EMS vehicle parked near one of the patrol cars, but the paramedics stand solemnly by the vehicle speaking to a Maryland state trooper. No rush. No life left to lose.

Jack and the forensics crew are already there waiting for him, and even vaguely feverish and barely holding it together, Will might not be the roughest-looking member of the team that morning. It's clear that everyone else had a long night with the Nhan murder, and the tired anger in Jack's eyes speaks volumes.

"Gideon is moving too fast," Jack says. "The accomplice who helped him escape must be working with him on the murders as well."

Will nods vaguely. "Any, uh… any leads within the staff of the BSHCI?"

"It's an absolute nightmare. Most of the employees don't have anywhere close to a thorough background check, and the pathetic state of the fingerprint database!" Price and Minerva shudder simultaneously, causing the raccoon daemon's striped tail to flare out. "Some enterprising investigative journalist is going to make that place their cash cow for life."

"So no," Jack says irritably. "Still at square one. Let's see what they've done with Dr. Carruthers."

From Will's perspective, the Carruthers house is closer to a mansion than any house he's seen in person throughout his entire life, including Hannibal's luxurious home. He's sure that there's some snooty distinction that keeps it from being called as such, like if the cut-off is having five bathrooms instead of a measly four, but he can't even begin to guess what the criteria might be. It's a three-story Victorian piece of work that looks more like something out of a bad gothic romance novel than a place where someone would actually live.

As they approach the front door, Will glances as Jack. "Earlier, you said that Bella was feeling sick. If you brought home my germs and she got sick, I-"

Jack shakes his head. "No, just a bad cough. She had it before you came down with anything. She's… had it a while," Jack says. Once he finishes speaking, he closes his mouth into a firm line, and his jaw tightens.

Even though he doesn't believe a word of it, Will says, "Maybe there's something going around."

"Probably."

Given the design of the exterior of the house, the interior is something that Will never could have possibly guessed. It does, however, lead Will to a conclusion about the nature of the house: it is something Carruthers inherited, a boon bestowed on a beneficiary to old wealth. The interior design work that Carruthers has done to the house would have been far easier to accomplish with a more modern architectural style. The fact that he had succeeded at all is a testament to how deep the pockets of the Carruthers family must run.

The entryway leads to a vast, open-concept first floor where the northern wall has been converted to an enormous aquarium. Near the stairs leading up to the second floor, a large glass tube attaches to the top of the gigantic tank and leads up through the ceiling. It's similar to some of the designs Will has seen in pictures of modern zoos and aquariums, aquatic tunnels weaving up and down through the observation areas so curious creatures like seals and otters can get a closer look at the people watching them.

Carruthers must have seen most of his patients here in his home, as there is a nook with a desk and several expensive-looking seats where his clients could sit for consultation. The kitchen is similarly quite open, but given the sparse cookware, Carruthers probably wasn't much of a chef. Although this house may be larger and more opulent than Hannibal's home, the kitchen is one major exception.

Price gives an impressed whistle.

"I don't see any fish. I guess all this was for his daemon," Zeller says. "What did the file say she was, a manta ray?"

"Think way smaller. Common stingray. Eighteen inches wide, not eighteen feet," Price replies.

"Oh, *wow*," Beverly breathes. She moves toward the back wall, Hartwin scampering in front of her. Once they reach it, the otter daemon rears up on his back legs and peers into the

aquarium. "This is so cool! It'd be amazing to be able to afford something like this. The most Hartwin gets is an oversized kiddie pool."

That statement makes a small stab of righteous anger flare up Will's spine. He thinks about his father and the cheap, insufficient aquarium he had to lug Tallulah in when one errand or another would force them to move inland from the rivers they called their home. And his father's daemon was amphibious, certainly less bound to the water than a stingray. His father had loved the rivers and bayous he was bound to, but his class meant that he truly could not afford any other option. Had Paul Carruthers been born into similar poverty or even a firmly middle-class family, he wouldn't have been able to engineer his well-respected career as a psychiatrist. He would have been stuck on or near the waters like everyone else with an aquatic daemon bigger than a goldfish, all other possible futures washed away.

Will's thoughts are interrupted when he spots a strange bit of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looks toward it and sees that it is a bluish-purple flower with a dark center twirling gently from the top of the connective tube down into the first floor aquarium. Jack follows his eyeline and grimaces.

"C'mon," he says, gesturing for the others to follow as Themis trots ahead. "Let's go."

They head up the stairs, following the tube. If the first floor was all shared and professional space, the second floor was where Carruthers must have spent his private time. On the second floor, the pipe splits into several routes, each leading to a room. There are even more flowers within the water here. Some are like the purple flower that drifted down first, but others include white trumpet-like flowers, orange flowers that look similar to snapdragons, and one type of flower that Will does immediately recognize - the stark contrast of pointed and rounded petals of violet columbines.

What Will sees once they reach the master bedroom stops him dead in his tracks. Once it became clear that Gideon was imitating prior kills by the Chesapeake Ripper, he had been mentally going through murders that had been flagged as the Ripper's to try to predict what Gideon might go for next. The scene displayed in the wall aquarium in the bedroom shares the taste and aesthetics of a Ripper kill, but it is not a replica of anything Will has seen before. It is something entirely new.

The body of Paul Carruthers is inside the aquarium, posed with wire in such a way that his arms are wide open in what looks like a sincere gesture of offering. The offering itself must be the tremendous number of flowers spilling from where they have completely stuffed his open chest cavity.

Will knows immediately that if he looked at this presentation with Rusakov-tinted lenses, the room would be absolutely blinding with Dust.

"What an escalation," Beverly says, her voice shaking.

"This has to be Gideon and his accomplice working together," Jack says, covering his mouth with his hand. "No way he did this by himself."

Oh, this is the work of an individual, but it sure as Hell isn't Gideon, Sabine whispers through the Tether. *This… this is the real thing. The Ripper.*

"But," Jack continues, "I've seen every kill the Ripper's done. This isn't a replica of them."

"Maybe Gideon and his accomplice decided to stop imitating the Ripper?" Beverly asks.

"Unless it IS the Ripper," Price says.

"No way. How would he know that Gideon and whoever he's working with were going to target Carruthers next?" Zeller asks Price, placing his hands on his hips.

"Unless Gideon's working WITH the Ripper!"

Will can barely hear the speculation around him. He swallows heavily, wanting to speak, to tell Jack what he knows deep down in his gut to be true, but the words just aren't coming. He stares at the flowers, and even though he knows there must be a more specific message to them, he can't concentrate on what it might be. It has a double meaning, and he's far too focused on and disturbed by the surface-level interpretation.

"Anyway, I know the white ones are tuberoses," Price says. "And the all-over purple ones are viscaria. Anyone else?"

"The ones that look like they have two types of petals are columbines," Zeller says. "Bev?"

Beverly shakes her head. "Sorry, the only plants I know are the ones I put in my salads. And even then, ask me to tell you the difference between kale and arugula and you're out of luck."

"Pretty sure the orange ones are kennedia. Bella dragged me to a botanical garden when we visited Australia a few years back. They were all over the place," Jack adds. "What I want to know is what they're trying to tell us with this."

Will finally finds his voice. "Ah… it's, um. The next signpost."

"Who's it pointing to?" Jack asks insistently.

"Well… what's another word for a flower?"

Zeller and Jack glare at him, clearly impatient. Beverly just seems confused, but there's no animosity in her expression. Price rolls and squints his eyes in thought, the only one to actually take the question non-rhetorically.

"Blossom? No," he murmurs. His eyes go wide and Minerva's paws dig into his shoulder in fear. "Bloom."

Will nods. "Alana's next."

A Husk

Chapter Notes

> WELP. Trust me, it was not my intent to not post a chapter for over a whole-ass year. But 2020 was garbage from the start, as we are all entirely too aware of as a species now. I'm sorry that it took so long for this to get here. It's super long, so... does that help? Haha.
>
> I will say that due to the ridiculously long hiatus, I recommend brushing up on prior chapters if you'd like to. This chapter has a plot point that I have (vaguely? I can't tell how heavy-handed my foreshadowing is) hinted at. Off the top of my head, the chapter with the daemonology museum is especially key. Part of the long delay was because I was actually planning on having this plot point later, but decided to drastically reshuffle my overall plot outline to accommodate putting it here instead.
>
> I'll be indefinitely skipping notes on dreamwidth for the time being, but I'll be happy to answer any questions folks may have on my twitter (@rosenritter42). I'm also going to be trying to catch up on comments when I have time and can answer stuff there.
>
> The next chapter, A Party, will... hopefully not take a year to write. Thank you so, so much for your patience!

For someone who is the next intended target of at least one but likely no greater than three serial killers, Alana Bloom is remarkably composed. Will watches her as she moves breezily throughout her house packing her luggage. Valerian struts beside her in perfect sync, his long and regal tail feathers never once interrupting her purposeful strides even as the Alpha woman and her daemon weave around each other.

Will lurks by the bay window in her living room. It's just past noon, about six hours since he gazed at the body of Paul Carruthers in his daemon's own water tank. He feels massively out of place in Alana’s cozy, comfortably middle-class home, somehow even more so than he does in Hannibal’s objectively more opulent house. Although not palatial in size, there is a very distinct atmosphere in Hannibal’s home that lends it a distinctly dreamlike feeling, like something out of a dark fairy tale. The small but stately manor in the deep, murky wood, where a hungry and exhausted traveler may seek the bounty of the owner but only if he can heed the esoteric manners of fae custom. It simply doesn’t have the same sense of sheer normalcy, of reality, that Alana’s house does, and if there’s anything Will currently feels rather disconnected from, it’s the conjoined twins of normalcy and reality.

He glances out the window. An officer dressed as a pest control employee is slowly pretending to examine Alana's lawn for unwanted vermin. His collared anteater daemon lends

verisimilitude to his disguise, and Will has to wonder how often this officer has had to go undercover in this particular outfit.

Alana must catch him staring because she laughs and says, "My neighbors must think I'm cursed. In the hours since Jack told me I was a target, I've had my house protected by Mr. Pest Control there, Ms. Electrician, and Mr. Emergency Septic Tank Plumber. And all while trying to entertain a conga line of guests."

"Well, I'm probably not as much of a fun protection buddy as Beverly Katz," Will says. "At least I'm the last shift you'll have to put up with before you get escorted to New York."

"You know that's not true, Will," Alana chides him gently. "I consider you a very good friend."

If we're such good friends, why have we never been alone in the same room until now? Sabine grouses.

For a moment, Will is terrified that he has blurted Sabine's thoughts aloud again, like he did when Jack, Hannibal, and Alana had their meeting following the Hobbs incident. That was only a few short months back, but Will can feel the tiny length of time weighing on his bones as if years had passed instead. Thankfully, there's nothing in Alana's expression to imply that the private thoughts of his bitter little daemon have leaked out again.

"Thanks," he mutters, turning his attention back out the window.

There is another house very similar to Alana's across the street. Thankfully, the houses in Alana's neighborhood are not identical. Not like all those eerily uniform planned communities that stretch out into the suburbs like a cloning experiment gone out of control, with their homes and lawns ruthless mirrors of each other down to the very blades of perfectly cut and impossibly green grass.

There is a large gingko tree in a place of honor in the yard across the street. The tree's leaves have turned bright yellow with autumn's progress, and nearly all of those abundant leaves have already fallen. They have been carefully raked into a beautiful golden pile; upon seeing it, Will can only imagine the glee his dogs would have in diving into the leaves and undoing all the hard work.

Due to the similar construction between the houses, the house across the street has a window nearly identical to the one Will is currently peering through. He can just barely make out a bit of movement inside the house's living room, but the inside is too dark to make out any finer details. All he can see is the shape of a man standing still on the other side of the glass, his daemon out of sight. For a moment, he worries that it may be Gideon, but the silhouette is too tall and thin to be a match.

Will squints, trying in vain to make out anything else about the man across the road. Perhaps his exhausted mind is playing tricks on him, but he thinks he sees the shape tilt its head slightly as if regarding him as well. The silhouette begins to raise an arm as if to wave at him, and something else rises up behind the silhouette. Elk antlers spread high and tower over the figure's head.

Will feels a hand on his shoulder, and he reels away from the window, gasping.

“Sorry!” Alana says, quickly removing her hand from Will’s shoulder as if he has burnt her. “You were kind of spaced out there.”

Although his fever has gone down to only slightly above normal, Will is still over-stressed and under-rested. He gives one more quick glance out the window and finds that the figure is gone. He isn’t sure if that should be encouraging or very, very troubling. He debates asking her about the neighbor, but he quickly decides that would likely only make him sound paranoid. She must have tried to get his attention about something, and he had been too focused on the house across the street to notice.

“Did… did you ask me something?” he asks.

Alana gives him a dubious look that scrapes against Will’s bones. He looks away from her, unable to bear the weight of her concerned suspicion. “I’m fine,” he lies. "Just getting over a cold. Foggy-headed. You did ask me something, right?"

She sighs, and Will can practically hear her picking through the issue in her mind with a fine-toothed comb, debating on if she will press him on the matter or pity him.

She smiles slightly, and with that beautiful expression Will knows that she has chosen pity. It’s more of a relief than if she had chosen to push him, but Sabine seethes unseen within her pocket, hating the sour taste of being patronized.

“Just if you think I can get away with a light jacket or if you think I’ll need a full-fledged coat in New York,” she says.

“New York City isn’t *that* much further north, and it's still October,” Will says. “Besides, it’s a fashion hub. I’m sure you can find something if you need it.”

“True,” Alana says. “There are a few boutiques I’ve wanted to check out, but never found the time to make the trip. I suppose when life gives you a threat on your life by a serial killer, make threat-on-your-life-by-a-serial-killer-ade.”

Will shakes his head. “You really seem to be in good spirits about it. You aren't worried about leading Gideon to your family?"

"You've seen pictures of Levi's mate. Seth could bench press a grizzly bear. He's a gentle giant, but I think he'd put that aside easily if anyone tried to threaten Levi or baby Tony. Hell, if Gideon came after my little brother and his baby, I'm pretty sure what Alpha instincts I have would get more than a little riled up," Alana says, chuckling. She runs her hand across the top of her luggage and her expression turns thoughtful. "Besides, I'll be in a high-rise apartment in a city with millions of people in it. Too much risk just to get to little old me. Safety in numbers, you know what I mean?"

Will considers her words, thinking about being surrounded by throngs of anonymous strangers. Hundreds of different emotions, different motives, different daemons, all pressing upon his empathy with the same weight until he loses himself completely in their cacophony.

Goosebumps rise up on his arm, and he can almost feel the dread of it seep into him through the raised follicles, settling in between the layers of his skin.

"Not really. I suppose that's where you and I have a philosophical disagreement," he says, smiling awkwardly. The moment he feels his mouth lurch into that expression, he hates it.

"Agoraphobia?" Alana asks.

"Too much information. Too many variables," he says, shaking his head. "When it's just me in a familiar space, I can stand my ground better. There's a certain powerful focus and clarity in it."

Alana frowns slightly. She takes a couple of steps towards him, and Will notices the hesitancy in her final step, notices the way Valerian's beautiful blue plumage on his torso ruffles with unease. "Sounds lonely."

Will shrugs, saying nothing.

"We're a social species, Will. It's good for us to know we have allies. That we can support and in turn be supported. That we can open up and be understood."

Her words are kind and her tone is soft and understanding. Even her scent, something that Will tries very hard to ignore lest it dig up the decaying remains of the unquestionably hapless crush he had on her that he tried to bury deep down over a year ago, is surprisingly soothing for an Alpha. She is completely sincere in her kindness, but the signs of her deep-rooted uncertainty beneath all of that support shine through regardless.

If Will took her on face value and unleashed some of the dark and chittering things that crawl through the more troubling corridors of his mind, he is sure that the hesitation she displays would coalesce into fear, possibly even revulsion. Her concern hinges on him being some pitiable and tortured charity case that has been misunderstood as eerie or off-putting. If she knew that not even he is sure how much of the dark things inside him were already there from the start and how many crept inside because he held the door open, he doubts her sympathies would last long.

Hannibal, on the other hand, seems almost eager to discover those dark things, at least as far as Will can read him. That in itself should be suspicious. After all, Will has not gotten as far as he has in life without some healthy skepticism about the motives of Alphas, But the curiosity Hannibal displays when it comes to Will is also strangely relieving in its own way. Whatever confusing mash of emotions he feels whenever he's engaging in his discussions with Hannibal, the slow, spreading ache of being pitied or reviled is not among them.

"I'm working on it," Will says, turning away from her slightly. "You finally got your wish of me going to therapy, even if it is only because of a work requirement."

"I'm glad," Alana says. "You deserve peace of mind, and you weren't getting that trying to tough things out on your own. Hannibal is a brilliant therapist, so I'm sure you're on the right track. He may be a little unorthodox, but it seems to work wonders for some."

"He's… something, alright."

Alana laughs, a bright and pleasant sound that brings a hesitant smile to Will's lips. Her expression turns to startled realization suddenly, however, and Will's tentative smile goes with it like a drop of water hitting hot summer pavement.

"Oh crap," she groans. "Mr. Stripey."

Will frowns. "Mr. Stripey?"

"C'mon, let me show you."

Will follows Alana and Valerian as they lead the way from the living room to the kitchen, taking care not to accidentally tread on the peacock daemon's tail feathers. Alana's kitchen is well-designed and well-equipped with a dark wood floor, fashionable marble countertops, and sleek silver appliances. Sitting near the window above the sink is a houseplant with each green leaf streaked with a bright white midrib and veins.

"It's a zebra plant," Alana explains. "It needs to be here because due to the layout of the house, the kitchen window gets the best natural light through most of the day. It's a horrible, finicky little gremlin that needs tons of indirect light and to have its moisture levels checked pretty much every day."

Will blinks at the plant, multiple questions jockeying for position for the honor of being the first one for him to ask. Finally, he settles on the most practical question in the bunch. "Why not get rid of it?"

Alana gives him an expression that is half-smile and half-wince. "It was a gift."

That sheds enough clarity to allow Will to make some deductions. "From Hannibal. Our talking about him jogged your memory of, uh… Mr. Stripey."

"Yep," Alana says, placing her hands on her hips. "You know he mentored me when I was a psychiatry resident. He gave the plant to me as a graduation present. It's a beautiful plant, sure, but it's so high-maintenance."

"He didn't name the thing, did he?" Will asks, doubting that Hannibal would ever in a million years choose a name as hokey as 'Mr. Stripey'.

"No, that was all me," Alana says, laughing. "One day near the end of his time spent as my mentor, he wore this suit that was probably very fashionable and I was just far too uncultured at the time to understand. It had these extremely bold stripes… anyway, I may have teased him a little over it, and as good-natured revenge he got me this unrelenting diva of a striped plant."

"And you'd like me to look after it until you can safely come back home," Will guesses.

"I'd really appreciate it. It's not a huge plant by any means, but I can't travel with it without running the risk of it deciding to die out of sheer spite."

"I don't mind. It's the least I could do considering the times you've helped with the dogs. And the plant is less likely to piss on the floor or eat your shoes."

Alana grins. "Don't say that out loud; it'll take that as a challenge."

A cheerful chime sounds from Alana's phone, and she checks the message. "It's from Jack. Looks like he'll be here along with the agents who are escorting me to New York in about fifteen minutes. Let me get you my spare key, and then it's back to scrambling to pack."

Will takes a moment to consider if he should follow her around like some kind of lost puppy, but Sabine's rasping internal sigh at the idea ultimately decides for him. "I'll wait in the living room," he says. "Gotta make sure the fake pest control cop has backup."

Once he has returned to the living room, he can't resist taking another look to the house across the road. The worrisome shape behind the glass is still gone, but that doesn't do much to dispel the simmering dread deep in his gut. He looks away, trying to banish the thought altogether.

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After several days of high-intensity activity, Gideon and his accomplice seem to vanish into thin air. Maybe it's because Alana Bloom has been secreted away and the remaining psychiatrists who have examined Gideon have all either received heightened security or traveled out of the Chesapeake area to lay low. There has been no sign of the escaped killer for over a week, and no further rebuke by murder from the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will sits at the desk in his empty classroom, glowering in frustration at a messy array of crime scene photos laid out before him. Some are pictures of Gideon's mate and her parents stabbed over Thanksgiving dinner, others of Carruthers and Nhan, others of known Ripper kills to compare and contrast, and some others which are unrelated entirely. It reflects Will's mindset lately: scattered and nightmarish.

He hears a soft knock from the entrance. Sabine growls quietly in annoyance.

"Office hours are Tuesday and Thursday, 4-7, or by appointment. No exceptions," Will says irritably without looking up.

"Ah, a pity," Aušrinė says brightly. "Will this impropriety affect our final grade?"

Will looks up in surprise. Hannibal is standing in the doorway with Aušrinė perched on his left shoulder. The Alpha's lips are upturned slightly in a small smile.

"What are you doing here?" Will asks. He doesn't intend it to sound rude, but as soon as the words are out, they sound harsh to his own ears.

If Hannibal is offended, he doesn't show it. "Alana was scheduled to give a special seminar on criminal psychology today. As she is unavailable, she requested that I fill in for her."

"Oh, she got you too, huh?" Will asks. When Hannibal tilts his head in confusion, he continues, "I'm checking in on the zebra plant you got for her when she completed her

residency. Gotta gently mist its precious, delicate leaves tonight after work, in fact."

"Ah, I'm impressed that it's still alive. She must be taking excellent care of it considering it's apparently a rather finicky breed," Hannibal says in a tone that confirms to Will that the Alpha put in hours of exhaustive research to find the finickiest plant available. "May I come in?"

“Do you need to be invited in, like some kind of vampire?”

Hannibal’s smile widens. “No,” he says. “I’m not bound by any supernatural rules, merely those of courtesy. So, may I, even if it's outside your office hours?”

Will hesitates. He thinks back to the revelation he’d had about Paul Carruthers while in the shower, and how he had heard Hannibal's voice during such a personal moment. Will can feel his ears threatening to turn red in mortification. But the longer he delays, the more opportunity and ammunition Hannibal has to try to deduce exactly why Will may be even more skittish than usual around him. The image of the Alpha's eyes lighting up with realization makes his stomach lurch with anxiety.

"It's fine," he says quickly. "It's mostly a boundary to keep over-eager trainees out of my hair. Some of them come in thinking that the one Omega in the faculty must be a pushover.”

“I’m sure you take some delight in showing them otherwise,” Hannibal says as he enters the room and strides to stand beside Will.

“Can’t let them think I take *too* much delight in it,” Will says, crossing his arms. “Otherwise they’ll get even more troubling ideas about me. An Omega can't even be strict without some Alphas fetishizing it.”

Perhaps it’s his mind playing tricks on him, but he thinks he sees a brief look of displeasure wash over Hannibal’s features at that implication. Whatever it is, it’s gone quickly as Hannibal glances over the various crime scene photos on his desk. “Some of these are related to the Gideon murders, but I’m afraid I don’t recognize the others. Has he killed again since Carruthers?”

“No, most of these aren’t Gideon’s. I guess I thought that if I put all of the monsters currently haunting me out in one place I might be able to force some revelations.”

“Has it worked?”

Will shrugs and slouches down into his chair. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I think it's all just congealing in my head like a thick, blood-colored sludge."

Aušrinė flaps down from Hannibal's shoulder and hops from photo to photo, tilting her dark head this way and that as she considers each one in turn. To Will's surprise, he feels Sabine stir within the pocket of his shirt, and he sees her slowly peek over the edge to fix one swiveling eye on Aušrinė.

“Some of them are Gideon’s work - well, Gideon and whoever he’s working with,” Will says. “Some are the Ripper. And some… some come from a source that doesn’t have a name yet.”

“Yes, these in particular seem to stand out,” Hannibal says, reaching down to touch two of the photographs. Both show male and female Beta couples shot to death in their own homes with none of the elaborate staging seen in either the legitimate Ripper kills or those meant to replicate his style. Both have been captured via the use of a Rusakov lens, showing worryingly bright Dust residue on the bodies of the murdered women.

“Two sets of murders that I’m attributing to this killer so far, but I expect he has other, earlier kills that are still just flagged as botched robberies,” Will says. “Can’t really compete with the theatrics of some of the other killers I’ve seen, but I’m worried he’s still very early in his design. He has the potential to escalate rapidly. And considering he’s already had two kills where he has managed to keep one of his victims alive after killing their daemon…”

“Certainly the most horrific way to die. It’s wise to keep an eye on him, whoever this new boy is,” Hannibal muses as he traces his index finger over the words on a brief report accompanying the two photographs. "Interesting."

"What?"

"The Marlows were killed on the spring equinox and the Christophers on the fall equinox. Either it's a coincidence or your fledgling killer may have a fascination with celestial timekeeping."

Will leans forward in his chair and stares down at the report. He frowns. "How did I miss that?" he mutters.

"Even the best and brightest of us can benefit from having another set of eyes to catch the things we miss," Hannibal replies.

Aušrinė gingerly hops over to stand by a picture of the stag head display of Cassie Boyle’s body from back in Minnesota. “For example,” she says, picking up where Hannibal left off, “I have no clue why this is here. Has this killer struck again?"

"Ah," Will says, slouching back into his seat. Small beads of sweat begin to gather on his brow, and he reaches up to mop them away. "That. I have a theory about it, but I've been keeping it to myself until I can decide if it has anything remotely close to merit or if I'm just lost in the fog, tilting at windmills."

"I'd love to hear this theory, if you'd be willing to share it," Hannibal says as Aušrinė ruffles her feathers in anticipation.

Will hesitates, debating whether or not he should tell Hannibal his suspicion about the killer who murdered Cassie Boyle. The current approved theory held by Jack and other higher-ups is that it was the work of a copycat. Will agrees with that part at least, but he knows there’s more to it. The killer hadn't truly been merely imitating Garrett Jacob Hobbs, but rather commenting on his work in such a way that clarified Will's thinking. It had been artistic

criticism, and the more that he has considered what had become of Cassie Boyle in that field outside of Minneapolis, the more he thinks he has seen the killer's rhetoric before.

"I think it was the Chesapeake Ripper," Will murmurs.

Hannibal is silent, and Will hates that he can't read the Alpha's expression. When he can't read a person, his already overpowered imagination goes into overdrive, whispering anxious suspicions to him. Hannibal has been so understanding of Will's eccentricities and surliness that he finds the idea of that eroding more troubling than he had expected. Sabine sinks down from the rim of her pocket, curling up into a tight ball the same way Will feels something like a lead weight pulling down his guts.

"I'll admit, I wasn't expecting to hear that," Hannibal says. Fortunately, Will can't detect any judgement in his tone, just curiosity. "Doesn't the Ripper kill in threes with years-long absences afterward? And then there's the matter of the geographical implication of his name."

"If I'm right, then the Ripper is much more industrious and well-traveled than the FBI has previously thought."

"Have you told Jack this theory?"

Will shakes his head, but the movement makes his head throb. "No. Like I said, I've been keeping it to myself. Until now, anyway."

"I remember when Gideon first claimed to be the Ripper. You told me that Jack lost a protege to him. That's why you haven't been forthcoming with your ideas. There's a raw, furious emotion that makes Jack far from an impartial detective where the Ripper is concerned."

"Don't want to get his hopes up that we've got a lead and have it fall to pieces because I saw patterns where there weren't any. Paranoia begetting pareidolia"

Hannibal takes a step towards him. "And if you are right, what was the Ripper doing in Minnesota?"

Will rubs at his right temple where an angry burning headache has flared to life. It hits Sabine first, as the distracting pain of it causes her to twitch in misery before curling even tighter in on herself. "He… doesn't need to travel for work. Not a regional manager or salesman. But he definitely has the luxury to be able to afford travel. He has money and doesn't need to be beholden to others' rigid schedules. He keeps an eye on other killers, either to be able to prove himself superior or out of pure curiosity. Garrett Jacob Hobbs caught his eye, and he critiqued his work through Cassie Boyle. Gideon plagiarized him, and he offered Carruthers as a rebuttal. To show what real art looks like."

The headache is starting to mess with his senses. Halos of color like the sickly rainbows of an oil spill spread out from the lights above him. The light itself also hurts, feeling like a drill straight to the back of his head as it enters his irises. He shuts his eyes tight to block out the light. His hearing must be affected as well, because when he hears Hannibal speak, the Alpha's quiet voice sounds like it is inches from his ear.

"Do you think what the Chesapeake Ripper does is art, Will?"

"I wish I didn't," Will confirms quietly. He draws in a shuddering breath and his lips twist into a small, bitter smile. A tear slips through his tightly shut eyes and leaves a warm trail of wetness in its wake as it slides down his cheek. He tells himself it's because of the headache. "I don't know why I do."

His eyes fly open in surprise when he hears a soft ruffling of fabric. Hannibal has unbuttoned his dark blue jacket, revealing more of the dark purple shirt he is wearing beneath it. He reaches into a pocket within the coat and removes a perfectly folded off-white handkerchief. His initials are embroidered in the corner.

"Here," Hannibal says gently, offering the handkerchief to Will.

Will stares down at the handkerchief, then back up to Hannibal's face. "I couldn't-"

"I insist. I hate to see a friend cry."

Despite Sabine's mortified protests, Will takes the handkerchief. He considers telling Hannibal that it's just because of the headache, that the light hurts, that his head feels like it could split open like an overripe melon. But he decides quickly that that option reeks of more than a little desperation. He wipes the tear away and offers the handkerchief back wordlessly.

Hannibal shakes his head slowly. "No. Keep it for now," he says. "I can tell you're suffering from a headache. You may need it until you can seek further medical attention."

"It's not that much worse than my usual headaches," Will lies, folding the handkerchief and placing it in his right pants pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hannibal's lips tug down slightly. "And before you say something like 'Headaches shouldn't be usual', I've been prone to them my whole life. I passed my most recent physical with no problems."

"And how recent was this 'most recent physical'? Was it around the same time as your psych evaluation with me, or was it considerably earlier than that? " Hannibal asks. When Will doesn't answer him, he sighs and continues, "You've been under high stress the last few months, dragged from case to case by Jack and the others. Asked to perform difficult and corrosive work with little understanding from them in reciprocity. When I say 'corrosive', I'm not merely engaging in metaphor. That type of stress impacts the body and mind. The cardiovascular system, the immune system, and especially mental wellness… if there are any existing hairline fractures there, they can shatter under the strain."

Will laughs bitterly. "So much for trusting me to make my own decisions about my health."

"I do still trust you on that," Hannibal replies calmly. "I'm merely counseling you so you can make the most informed decision you can. Take my advice and do with it as you will, but know that as far as I'm concerned, I find the world that has Will Graham alive and exerting influence upon it more interesting and appealing than any alternative."

Sometimes, Will imagines circular lines around himself. They're usually dictated by Sabine, and she is a fierce guardian of these imagined boundaries. The furthest one out separates the

billions of strangers in the world from his acquaintances. Brian Zeller lurks just barely within the acquaintance circle, but Jimmy Price's odd cheerfulness and Beverly Katz's well-intentioned friendly teasing place them closer to the middle.

Jack Crawford is difficult to place. He certainly has spent more time with Jack than the others, but there have been times where Will has ended up feeling like an expedient tool in Jack's ceaseless pursuit of justice.

Alana, too, is a tough one. For quite some time, Alana was the friendliest person in his life, and absolutely the one most willing to reach out to him and come to his defense. She has come the closest to the next line surrounding Will, the one that divides acquaintances from intimate relationships. Will has never reached out, has never invited her to step over that last boundary, but he has the distinct feeling that if he did, she'd give him a faltering smile and take a step back.

Nobody has ever crossed the intimacy line. His friendships in childhood were nebulous and fragile, the kind of gossamer little connections that fall apart as soon as second grade rolls around and it’s no longer gauche to not invite an entire class to birthday parties. Too easily lost in the background to be bullied when he's there, but too itinerant to be worth remembering once he's gone.

No long-term romances in late adolescence and adulthood, just a few quick fucks to rid himself of his virginity and blow off steam during difficult exam periods. Meaningless friction followed by optional, half-hearted orgasms.

He thought he had made peace with it all long ago. That he was destined to be a social hermit who keeps his acquaintances at arm's length and staves off loneliness with the pure-hearted help of an ever-changing number of dogs. It was certainly the most stable, safest option.

But then Hannibal showed up.

Hannibal, who has refused to remain a stranger. Hannibal, who has lived up to his namesake's tireless conquest of territory. Hannibal, who now stands just on the other side of the intimacy line with the clear intent to be the first person to step across it. Whether he wants a close friendship with Will or something beyond that, Will still doesn't know.

Not that it matters, Sabine chimes in, her voice through the Tether sounding tired. *Remember the pact we made all those years ago? We can't be seen. Can't be known. You know what happened when we tried.*

Will agrees with her wordlessly, nodding softly. It takes a moment for him to realize that Hannibal might interpret the nod as agreement with his words instead of Sabine's internal warning, so he covers to the best of his ability. "Ah," he says, his voice tighter than he'd like. "Thanks. For your concern."

Hannibal gives him a small, reassuring smile. "I'm glad it's appreciated," he says. "One more thing before I leave you to your work. I was going through my collections of medical journals last night and found some of Gideon's surgical papers from his early career. I'd be happy to share them with you if you think they would be useful."

"Um, sure. At this point I'll take whatever I can get if there's even a remote chance it'll lead to a breakthrough."

"Excellent. I don't live very far from Alana. Perhaps you could come to my home after you tend to her plant. We could examine the papers over a simple dinner."

Sabine scoffs at the idea that any meal Hannibal prepares could ever be called 'simple' by anyone else's perspective. If she has other ideas about what Will should or should not do, he shuts her out. Given his headache, the last thing he wants is the prolonged, recursive social dance of 'Oh, I couldn't impose' and 'Oh, but I insist'.

"It'd have to be quick," Will says. "My dogs."

"Of course," Hannibal says. Although his face remains pleasantly neutral, Aušrinė gives away how pleased they are with a proud ruffling of her dark feathers. "I'll be looking forward to it. Have a good afternoon, Will, and I'll make sure we have a good evening."

With that, Aušrinė flutters up to perch on Hannibal's shoulder. She turns, looking to where she knows Sabine is hidden away. "Until later, Sabine," she says brightly.

Sabine, burning up with something that might be embarrassment, refuses to talk to Will directly for what little remains of the work day.

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The sun is low and red when Will arrives at Alana's house later that afternoon. As he fishes for Alana's key, he feels a prickle on the back of his neck, as if he were being watched. He looks up and around, seeing nothing out of place in Alana's sleepy neighborhood. There's a black, boxy van with South Carolina plates parked in the driveway of the house across the street. The same house with the pile of gingko leaves and the strange figure Will had maybe hallucinated in the window. The van is a little odd, but it's entirely possible it just belongs to the house's owner, or to one of their guests.

Just as he is turning around to return his attention to Alana's door, he hears a soft, metallic thump and a muffled grunt from somewhere he can't place. He gives the neighborhood another suspicious look, focusing on the van. But the vehicle is completely motionless, and there's no clear sign anywhere of what could have made the sound.

Maybe a hallucination, Sabine offers, sounding unsure.

"Is that better or worse than it being an actual creepy sound?" Will mutters aloud as he hurriedly unlocks Alana's door.

Much worse.

Once inside, a small portion of Will's unease melts away thanks to Alana's comforting scent lingering in her empty home. He switches on the light and scans the Alpha's entryway and what he can see of the living room. Nothing seems amiss.

Right as he moves to close the door behind him, he feels a strong, sudden autumn wind sweep down the street behind him. He hears the rustling of countless dying, drying leaves as they're jostled from their resting places. With the wind pushing against it, the door slams closed with more intensity than Will intended.

"Five minutes. Just check the plant's moisture levels, see if it looks healthy, and leave," he tells himself. "Easy."

The feeling of being watched still hasn't faded and actually increases as he moves further into the living room. The red sunset outside seeps in through the curtains covering the window, casting Alana's sensible furniture in eerie orange light and dark black shadow.

He should reach for the lightswitch, should banish the creepy ambience with a flood of artificial light. But he pauses with his hand over the switch, his attention drawn to the window.

He steps forward, his hand falling away with the lights still off. He pulls the curtain open wider. The sudden wind has scattered the yellow gingko leaves that were piled up on the lawn across the street. There's a sign where the leaf pile had been - a real estate sign bearing two prominent words in bold white letters. FOR SALE. The house has been on the market for over a month. Empty.

And the black van is now parked in Alana's driveway, blocking Will’s car.

A sudden shattering sound comes from the kitchen. Will reaches for his gun but his hand comes away empty; it's in the glovebox of his car. He curses the same time as Sabine, but they pick different words to express their displeasure.

He looks around for anything he could improvise as a weapon, but there's nothing promising around. Will feels adrenaline start to surge through his veins, making his muscles tense in preparation for a fight. Carefully, he makes his way toward the source of the sound.

Abel Gideon stands by the kitchen counter, the zebra plant's broken pot and spilled soil at his feet. He holds his right hand up, his index finger extended, clearly remaining motionless after pushing the plant to the floor. "Oops," he says, grinning. "Clumsy me."

"You're under arrest-" Will begins, but Gideon interrupts him with a shake of his head and a few quick *tsks.*

"Oh, you're going to have to try harder than that."

Will lunges for him. Gideon swerves to the side, aiming a retaliatory punch at Will's side. Will manages to dodge and minimize the impact, though he knows the hit will still leave a nasty bruise.

Gideon's mockingbird daemon flutters around Will's head, trying to disorient him. She can't risk getting too close, however, lest she accidentally break the taboo by brushing up against Will's bare skin. But it gives Will an idea. Even though Gideon is on the shorter side for an Alpha and Will somewhat tall for an Omega, there's no match as far as brute strength is

concerned. As long as they're exchanging blows, Will can neither overpower nor outlast him. That leaves one option: fight dirty.

Will splits his attention between dodging Gideon's attacks and tracking his daemon. Finally, he sees his chance. The daemon swoops down and Will swings his elbow up to meet her. His sleeves are long enough that his bare skin doesn't touch her, but the strike sends her tumbling to the ground, stunned.

Gideon gasps and flinches, feeling his daemon's pain. "Medea," he croaks, but the sound is barely out of his mouth before Will sweeps his legs and sends him down atop the crushed zebra plant.

In an instant, Will is on him, hands wrapped around Gideon's throat. He isn't thinking coherently, merely feeling the rage and adrenaline crashing through him.

The skin of Gideon's neck is warm and dry, and Will can feel the prickle of unshaved stubble against his palms like the legs of countless insects. His hands itch. It would be easy. Easy to bear down harder. Easy to disregard Gideon’s weak attempts to claw his hands away from his throat. Easy to crush the gasping, twitching meat fluttering against his palms until it’s cold and still.

The thing that snaps Will out of his fury is a juxtaposition of color - his knuckles turning bleached-bone white with exertion as Gideon's face starts to turn a sickly bruised purple from lack of air. From there, he sees Gideon's mockingbird daemon out of the corner of his eye. She's twitching pathetically on the floor nearby, clearly in extreme distress. Dying. It shocks Will's strangling grip loose. As soon as his hands are off his neck, Gideon takes in a long, ragged breath and begins to shake with a silent laugh.

"You have the right to remain silent," Will begins, his voice trembling as the adrenaline starts to drain out of his blood. "Anything you say can be held against you-"

"Not bad, Mr. Graham. Strong grip for an Omega," Gideon interrupts, grinning. His voice is like sandpaper, and he must have bitten his tongue in the scuffle because blood is seeping through his teeth. He spits the mouthful of blood out onto the floor and wheezes out another laugh. He turns his head to look up and over Will's shoulder. "If this were a fair fight, I'd be worried."

Before Will can register what he means, a heavy blow hits him in the back of the head. The last thing he registers is hitting the ground face first, and darkness consumes him.

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When Will wakes up, the first thing he becomes aware of is the throbbing pain at the base of his skull. He moves his head slightly and gasps when pain and a burst of light explodes behind his eyes. He simply lies there as consciousness tentatively creeps back into him, breathing raggedly against the cool wood floor.

The second thing he realizes is that he can barely breathe through his nose, and the only thing he can smell is copper. Tentatively, he reaches up to his face and finds a copious amount of

blood drying against his nostrils, lips, and chin. His nose aches, but he doesn't think it's broken. His other hand scrambles, eventually finding a scrap of cloth in his pants pocket. He brings it to his nose to wipe away some of the blood. The embroidered H.L. in the corner comes back streaked with dark red.

The third thing he realizes, with a sickening lurch to his stomach, is that he can't feel Sabine in her pocket. His head pounds as he clambers up into a seated position. Panic blurs his vision, and his increased heart rate and blood pressure causes a new trickle of blood to seep out of his nose. He presses the handkerchief to his nose to catch the fresh blood.

"Up here," Sabine whispers.

He looks up, squinting at the uncomfortably bright light flooding the room. Dangling from the high ceiling is a thick, dark metal chain that ends in a tiny wrought iron cage barely large enough to contain a single canary.

He tries to speak to her through their Tether, but his head throbs with pain. Instead, he whispers, "Are you okay? Did they… did they…"

"I don't think so," Sabine interrupts. "They probably used gloves to put me in here."

Will curses as he slowly stands, pressing his right palm to his aching temple. Sabine's cage hangs only a few inches above the top of his head. Now that he's closer, he can see that the small spaces between the bars of the cage are filled in with a fine metal mesh.

"Could you…"

"No," Sabine replies. "It's too narrow. Not even a gnat could get through. But it gets worse."

Will groans. "What?"

"There are scratches against the metal all over the place. I'm not the first daemon to end up here."

Despite the horrible pain in his head, Will seizes the small cage and tries to rip it down from the ceiling. The chain is too strong, however, and it easily supports his weight. He drops back to the ground, panting as he bends over with his hands on his thighs to stabilize himself. His head is swimming.

"What kind of person has a tiny iron birdcage to put daemons in?" he growls.

"The kind that owns a silver guillotine."

"You think-"

"I *know*," Sabine whispers. "It's on. I can feel it. The Dust around us… the Dust in me… flinches away from its energy."

Now that she has contextualized the odd feeling in the air, Will knows she's right. It isn't just the haze of a mild concussion, but something actively in the air. He can feel something

humming and dangerous in the atmosphere, like the way hair raises on end just before a lightning strike.

Will knows where he is. He's in a mansion near Greenville, Delaware, about an hour and a half northeast of Baltimore. He's in the home of the private collector who owns one of only two complete silver guillotines in the United States.

"And he's been using it on people," Sabine breathes, her voice raw with horror. "We've got to get out of here."

Will finally pulls his attention away from his imprisoned daemon to examine his surroundings. The room is spacious and brightly lit with tall, windowless walls, probably a repurposed large squash court. There are two entrances, with Will stuck close enough to one that he could just barely reach it if he pushed his Tether to its absolute limit. His stomach churns with nauseous dread at the thought that it will likely come to that. The other door is impossibly far away as long as Sabine is trapped.

The room is eerie enough as-is, but it is only made more so with the sight of several other cages hanging from the ceiling. They're all scrupulously spaced and sized. Each is far enough away that if there were daemons in every cage, their humans would not be able to reach each other due to Tether restrictions. The largest cage could maybe hold a small dog daemon, and even then that might be a tight fit.

But what's most disturbing, beyond the cages and the desperate scratches inside, are the cushy seats that line the walls. What the collector does, he does with an audience.

The image comes too easily to Will's mind: people imprisoned just like he is, body unrestrained but their souls trapped, begging for mercy while hungry eyes look on, eager to be entertained by the most excruciating torment a person can suffer. He can nearly see their sweaty, excited faces peering at him from the empty chairs. A horrified moan wrenches its way out of his throat before he can pull it back. The sound echoes around the room, his own voice seeming to mock him.

A moment later, he hears a muffled, panicked voice from behind the door nearest to him, clearly trying to get his attention. It could easily be a trap, but he finds the idea of just waiting around for whoever has caged his daemon to come back to be repellant. He looks up to the cage, considering.

“Go,” Sabine whispers.

Will turns back to the door. He pulls the handkerchief away from his face, briefly relieved to see that the blood has stopped flowing. He folds the cloth and crams it into the left back pocket of his pants. Taking in a deep breath, he steps toward the door.

The first few steps are fine, being well within the length of his Tether. But soon he starts to feel the painful tug of distance that he has avoided instinctively since early childhood. Will has alway preferred to keep Sabine close, never feeling the urge to test their limits. This inclination only cemented itself further when he presented and her irregularities appeared, a

desire for closeness becoming an almost pathological need to hide her away from external scrutiny.

By the time he's actually at the door, each step is agony. With sweat covering his entire body at the effort, he reaches for the door and swings it open.

The lights are dim behind the door, but they're bright enough to allow Will to see the silver guillotine, awake and humming with its terrifying energy. It looks much like the inert one in the daemonology museum, but the knowledge that it is active lends it even more menace. The energy that radiates from it gives it an atmosphere that it is alive and calculating, a predator waiting to strike.

With a sudden flash that strains Will's eyes and sends a sharp ache to the back of his head like a pickaxe through the eye, the lights in the silver guillotine room flare up bright. Will blinks, trying to reorient himself. Between the pain in his head, the ache of the strained Tether, and the fear of the guillotine, Will's knees buckle and he collapses to the ground. The muffled voice, much closer now, yelps in fear, and Will can hear something else accompanying it: the equally muffled shrieks of a terrified bird.

With a few more blinks, Will's vision clears. There are more chairs lining the walls of this room, and the idea that the intercisions the collector does to his victims are so popular that they have a VIP section makes Will almost sick enough to vomit.

Then, he notices the bodies in the cages of the guillotine. On one side is Frederick Chilton, bound and gagged, his skin pale and eyes wide with terror. In the same cage as Chilton, Gideon's daemon Madea perches calmly on a rivet.

The other side contains a writhing burlap bag; given the shrieking coming from within, Chilton's rooster daemon must be inside. Gideon lounges against the far end of the cage, grinning at Will.

"Took you long enough to join us, Mr. Graham. Now the real show can begin," Gideon says. He kicks the burlap bag and Chilton winces in pain in the other cage. "Quiet down, you. Can't you see we've got company?"

"You can't do this," Will says through gritted teeth. He knows he's not going to find the strength to stand this far away from his daemon, so he focuses on trying to crawl further into the room. It's degrading, and the pain is still horrific, but he has to try.

"Oh?" Gideon asks, quirking one of his brows. "Pray tell."

"It's unethical!"

"Is that all? Ethics, shmethics. Everyone in this room is well beyond that arbitrary little line in the sand. What's ethical about killing your mate and her family? What's ethical about rooting around in your patients' heads and corrupting their sense of self? What's ethical about shooting a man's daemon and watching him die a few minutes later?"

All of the flush of exertion drains out of Will's skin, leaving him pale and shaken. Gideon's words bring back the memory of killing Hobbs, and for a moment he is no longer lying prone on the floor in front of a silver guillotine but standing in the home of the Hobbs family, his arms and glasses smeared with Louise Hobbs's blood and the Dust of Garrett Jacob Hobbs's daemon prickling against his skin.

"If you're wondering how I knew about that, I didn't. At least, not for sure. Not until your reaction just now gave it away. Don't worry about me sharing your dirty little secret, though," Gideon says. "Pretty soon neither Chilton nor I will be in a position to say much of anything."

Chilton moans in fear, and the sound just makes Gideon smile wider. "To be fair, and unlike some people in this room I could name, I can't take credit for the idea. It's the pet theory of my associate who helped liberate me from the belly of the BSHCI. He likes to follow the stories about you in Tattle Crime and theorize what information Freddie Lounds couldn't get her greedy paws on. Sometimes he prattles on about you like a schoolgirl with a crush. It's almost cute."

Before Will can retort, he hears a door slam behind him.

"Ah," Gideon says. "Speak of the devil."

Will turns his head and shoulders back toward the holding room where Sabine is still imprisoned. The door at the far end of the room is open and two figures are approaching him. One is a frail-looking elderly man with his hare daemon trembling in one arm. His free hand, wrinkled and spotted with age, clutches the fabric of his shirt over his chest. Will sees the glint of a gun in the bright light at the elderly man's shoulder as the other figure urges him along.

To Will's horror, the other figure is Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

The impossible Hobbs is wearing the same clothing Will killed him in, and his skin is pallid and waxy in death. His elk stag stomps behind him, but his heavy body makes no sound against the smooth wooden floor. The bullet holes that Will shot through the daemon are present, each oozing a dark, viscous liquid tinged with golden Dust. There's something else strange about the creature that Will only places when the elk shakes his head, brandishing his antlers. His body is covered in dark brown banded feathers like those on the wings of a hawk.

Hobbs looks up at the cage Sabine is trapped in as he forces the old man forward. As he passes, he gives the cage a small, knowing smile that makes Will's blood boil with righteous fury.

Once Hobbs and the old man enter the room with the guillotine, Chilton's eyes widen. He recognizes Hobbs, or rather whoever Hobbs actually is. He turns his gaze to Will and he tries to shout a name to him. It has three syllables, but with the gag in his mouth, he can't make his words any clearer. After a few attempts, he gives up, leaning back as much as he can and groaning pitifully.

Will recoils away as Hobbs and the old man pass him, wincing with the pain brought on by the sudden movement. Hobbs's elderly captive looks down at him with terrified, pleading

eyes. But there is no disorientation in those aged, bloodshot eyes, and this is what confirms the man's identity to Will. If the man had been an innocent victim, there would be some amount of confusion in his terror. This man is the owner of this home, of the silver guillotine within it, and the one who designed these rooms and the seats provided so his guests could have comfortable seating to view one of the most depraved and tortuous acts possible. He can beg Will to intervene with his eyes as long as he wants, but with Sabine trapped there's nothing Will can do to assist him. And, loathe as he is to admit it, there's a dark part of Will somewhere deep within that doesn't want to intervene on his behalf at all.

Seeing that Will is in no place to help, the old man pleads with his captor, "Please. Y-you c-can't do this. It's not right!"

"Pretty interesting suggestion considering your little parties, Mr. Snyder," Hobbs says drily. "Did the people you cut say the same things? Not judging you, of course. Just curious."

"I'll do anything. Anything! You want money, I'll give you millions. You want the names of my guests who demanded I use the guillotine for them? I've got proof they were here! Blackmail material! You can have it all, just-"

"Oh, quit your blubbering, for all our sakes," Gideon interrupts. "Neither my associate nor I have any interest in severing you whatsoever. I can't speak for Mr. Graham or Mr. Chilton, of course, since the former might consider it righteous after all you've done and the latter has a particularly putrid sense of curiosity. But my point is that we don't want to use the guillotine on you. I want you to use it on me."

Chilton sobs and Gideon nods thoughtfully as if his prisoner had just made a clever retort. "Oh, good point," he says. "I mean us, obviously."

"And you won't kill me to keep me quiet?" Snyder asks. Although there's a glimmer of cautious hope in his eyes, Will can see that the stress of the situation is taking a toll on the old man's body. The hand holding his hare daemon is trembling with several of his fingers curling limply in a way that makes Will wonder if he's experiencing numbness in the limb. He can't seem to fully catch his breath.

"I'll let you go. It'll be like we were never here," Hobbs promises. He places a hand on the old man's right shoulder, and Snyder winces in obvious pain. "As long as you play along."

"I'll do it! I'll do it!"

Will, prone and powerless as he observes Snyder at the control panel, is horrified to see how quickly the silver guillotine can be prepared for its grim purpose. He considers his meager options: screaming at them to stop, somehow dragging himself further into the room despite the white-hot burning agony in his head and Tether, or retreating to be nearer to Sabine so he can avoid watching the intercision. None of them give him an obvious advantage, aside from possibly the final option.

He should want to look away, to turn his back on what is about to happen in front of him. He doesn't.

"Ready, Frederick?" Gideon asks as a series of clicking and whirring sounds start to fill the room. Chilton sobs with increasing despair as the blade above the space between the cages rises several inches and holds steady. "3… 2… 1…"

Gideon waves a hand dramatically like a maestro at an orchestra. Snyder, his palms slick and clammy with perspiration, pulls a lever on the control panel. The blade falls.

Will would be lying if he were to claim that he never imagined what an intercision would look like. Of course he had; his entire post-grad career has been dedicated to daemons and Dust in the context of forensic grotesqueries. He had researched all known methods of intercision throughout history, including the silver guillotine. He had even seen an actual intercision of an alleged murderer recorded for research purposes back in the 1960s. But somehow reading the reports of what to expect during the process and seeing a recording hadn't adequately prepared him for the experience of it in person. He imagines it must be similar to reading accounts of nuclear disaster, of seeing test footage of the bomb, versus seeing the infernal flash over your own city as you go about your day.

Unlike a nuclear blast, there is no physical evidence of what has happened to Gideon and Chilton. There is no flash of blinding light, no destructive wind, no skin-boiling heat. The blade simply comes down between Gideon and Chilton and their daemons, and then their bodies go limp. But like the nuclear bomb, the thing that terrifies Will the most is the effect that can't be seen by the naked eye. Will feels a horrible burning all through the Tether he shares with Sabine, and he isn't sure if it's the pain of being pulled to its absolute limit or his empathy making him imagine what the cut must be like or some sinister byproduct of the intercision process. Burnt and poisoned Dust released to land on him like radioactive fallout.

Gideon is dead before the blade even hits its resting place at the base of the device. One moment his mockingbird daemon is perched in the cage and the next she's gone. His body sits in the opposite cage, motionless.

Chilton is not nearly so lucky.

Even with all his flaws, Will knows that Chilton doesn't deserve what has happened to him. He had deserved censure, certainly, and to be stripped of his position. It's possible that his negligence and incompetence reached the criminal threshold thereby making him deserving of some jail time. He didn't deserve the horror that is surviving intercision.

Chilton's chest rises and falls, and his eyes are opened wide. They're glassy, however, and unfocused. Like his eyes, his mouth hangs open. Every so often he lets out a guttural sound from the back of the throat. Will realizes that he must be in shock. If he's lucky, he'll die from it before it can wear off. Will doesn't want to imagine what existence will be like for him if he doesn't.

Just looking at Chilton makes something deep and instinctual in Will recoil in horror and disgust, so much so that his overtaxed and injured head starts to swim with it. Feeling that the prickling sensation across his scalp and the eerie light blooming across his vision will intensify into a full-fledged faint, Will looks away.

Will's attention is drawn away from the morbid sight by an equally morbid sound. He turns toward it slowly, holding his hand at his temple as if that could help stabilize him. He finds Snyder collapsed on the floor near the guillotine's console. The old man must have been living with heart disease for years, and now the extreme stress brought on by the discovery of his criminal activity and the invasion of his home has brought on a massive heart attack.

The old man looks up to Hobbs, his face twisted in pain. "H-help," he rasps. "Y-you said…"

Hobbs stares at him dispassionately. "I said I'd let you go. And I am. If you hurry to the phone we made you leave in your dining room, maybe the paramedics will arrive before it's too late."

Snyder tries to make it to his feet, but he simply slumps over with his hand still curled painfully tightly against his chest. His hare daemon lies beside him, twitching and dissipating into Dust.

And with that, for all intents and purposes, Will and Hobbs are alone.

"Do you know who I am?" Hobbs asks. Before Will can decide if he means it rhetorically or sincerely, he continues, "No, I suppose you wouldn't. It's not like I introduced myself when you visited Gideon at the BSHCI."

Will racks his aching mind to try to pull any new information out of the words. As long as Will is hallucinating that the man is Hobbs, he'll never be able to identify him in a photo lineup. But there's nothing new to latch onto; Will had already suspected that Gideon's accomplice worked within the BSHCI. Having it confirmed changes nothing. He would give anything to rid himself of the hallucination and see the man for who he truly is.

Hobbs strides over to loom above him. Behind him, the out of place feathers that cover his stag daemon flutter gently. He reaches down, offering his hand to help Will up.

Will sneers at him with bared teeth and uses what little strength he has to push himself away, back into the room where Sabine is being held. He stops when he is directly beneath her cage. Being closer to her reduces the strain on their Tether, which allows him to regain a small amount of energy. But he knows it's not enough. If he has to fight this man wearing Garrett Jacob Hobbs's face, he'll be no match for him.

Hobbs laughs, but it isn't derisive. He sounds pleased as he continues to speak, "You've got a bold spirit. More so than most Omegas. Their instinct would be to appease, but you put up a fight like a wild thing. Those bruises you put around Gideon's neck… impressive work. It's your second most interesting trait. The first, of course, being that daemon of yours. And the fact that she can change."

For a moment, time freezes for Will. The air in his lungs turns to icy fog, his blood runs cold, goosebumps raise up on his skin, chills race up and down his spine. When he can think again, he shakes his head. "She… she's a chameleon. Of course she can change colors. She may be irregular, but that part is normal."

"Now, now," Hobbs says as he keeps moving towards Will. "Lying doesn't suit you. Not when your truth is so spectacular."

Will takes in a deep breath and holds it until it burns. He releases it slowly, as if all the panic rushing through him can be expelled along with the air. "What did you see?" he asks, surprised at the strength in his voice.

"Gideon and I had just killed the old man's staff and shut him up in a room to deal with later. When we came to get you and Chilton out of the van, I saw it. Gideon had his hands full with Chilton, so he missed out on it. Not that I'm complaining. Fun as he was, between you and me, he didn't deserve to see something so… beautiful."

"What," Will repeats through his teeth, "did you see?"

"You and your daemon were out cold, and she was spilling out of that pocket you keep her in. Her body…" The false Hobbs pauses and shakes his head, as if struggling to come up with the right words to describe something transcendental. He continues, "Her body twisted with overlapping forms. Her shape and size inconsistent and obscured, like a mirage. An antler of a stag slowly growing out of her head, the feathers of a raven ruffling down her back. When I touched your shoulder to pick you up, she snapped back into her chameleon shape. You're somehow still unsettled."

His entire adult life, Will has been dreading this exact moment. He had spent long, sleepless nights wondering what he would feel and do if someone else found out about his true irregularity. Decades of research spent trying to find any report, anywhere, about anyone who ever had a condition like his, only to find nothing outside of the realm of fantasy and fiction. He could weather the loneliness of being the only person in history with this strange affliction, but the notion that terrified him and urged Sabine to keep herself hidden away as much as possible was the idea of being morbidly fascinating to everyone else. If he had been born in the late 19th century, he would be the exploited prize of a freak show. Come one, come all! See the terrifying and impossible vision of the Omega Who Never Settled!

He isn't sure what would happen to him if word got out now. Possibly he'd be poked and prodded in the name of science, or stalked online and off if his identity got out. He can't risk it. He can't let this killer go knowing his most carefully protected secret.

He glares at Hobbs, the fear in him tempered and honed into a powerful fury. He doesn't confirm what Hobbs has said. He doesn't need to.

Hobbs smiles. "If you're afraid I'll tell, don't be. What you have is too precious to share. You don't just understand anyone with your empathy. With the way your daemon changes, you can reflect anyone's very soul."

"So you're going to blackmail me into… what? Running off with you?" Will asks, his voice low. "Being your own personal oddity?"

"No. I want you to soar with me of your own free will."

"Not happening."

"Maybe not yet. But I'm a patient man, Mr. Graham. I'm sure at some point you'll see the value in having a friend like me."

Something sharp and spiteful unfurls inside Will, and before he can even evaluate the words that are bubbling up inside him, he finds them tumbling out of him. "You can be as patient as you want. You might not have the time for anything to come of it. You and Gideon didn't kill Paul Carruthers. The Chesapeake Ripper did, inspired to act after seeing your plagiarism of his design. Better hope he doesn't sniff you out."

Hobbs gives him a delighted smile as he and his strange feathered stag walk past Will to stand at the exit. He reaches into his pocket and reveals Will's phone. He sets the phone on the floor and slides it across the polished wood with enough strength that it comes to a skidding stop at Will's feet.

"I'll be in touch," he says. With that, he's out the door and gone.

Will grabs the phone and is surprised to find that only three hours have elapsed since his fight with Gideon in Alana's home. He has twelve missed calls: ten from Jack, one from Alana, and two from Hannibal. He doesn't have it in him to check the voicemails.

Before he does anything else, he looks up to the cage suspended above him. Now that he's out of immediate danger, his exhaustion and worry are sinking back into his bones. He tries again to reach through the Tether, but it just causes yet another flare of pain in his temple.

"Sabine?" he asks.

Sabine doesn't reply for a moment. When she finally does, her voice is almost a whisper, "I wish the Tether was working. There are things I'm feeling that I can't put into words."

"Me too," Will sighs. His grip tightens on the phone until his knuckles go white. "Can you keep it together?"

"Barely," Sabine replies. "It's taking all my concentration just to keep this shape. I can't keep my coloring consistent."

"That's fine. Isn't that why you picked that form as a disguise? So you can use the colors to vent your need to change in public."

Sabine's only response is a quiet mutter that Will can't make out. If their Tether was functioning properly, he'd have a better idea of what she meant by it. The feeling of uncertainty sends shivers down his back.

He looks down at the phone in his hand, and his fingers tremble as he dials Jack's number. He hesitates before hitting the call button.

The line barely manages half a ring before Jack picks up.

"Will! Are you alright? Chilton's guards have been murdered and he's-"

"He's here. So is Gideon," Will interrupts, his voice sounding hollow in his ears. He swallows. "Technically. On both counts. I'm in Delaware, at the Snyder estate. Bring bolt cutters and maybe a blow torch."

Jack pauses for just a moment. "The real estate magnate? What the hell happened?"

"Long story," Will replies. "I'll tell you what happened once you get here. But for now, I need to focus on staying awake. I've been running on adrenaline and I think I may have a concussion."

He looks back to the room that contains the silver guillotine. Jack is saying something in his ear, but Will can't focus on it. All he can see is Snyder's dead body, and all he can think about is how the old man's heart gave out once his own adrenaline ran out. He knows it's not the same thing, since he's young with no cardiovascular problems, but the sight of the corpse is just one more stressor heaped onto his already very overloaded plate.

"Fuck," he sighs, trying to run a hand through his sweaty and tangled hair. "Get here soon, Jack."

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The things Will remembers between his rescue from Snyder's holding room to his arrival at the hospital are more dramatic snapshots of sensation than a cohesive and coherent chain of events. The sound of countless shoes stamping against the smooth wooden floor. The sight of sparks overhead as a torch cuts through the metal bars keeping Sabine trapped. The smell of the vomit from a rookie agent when he discovers Chilton twitching and intercised in the silver guillotine. The feel of Sabine's skin in his hands as he cups her over his heart while they're carried out of the mansion on a stretcher. The taste of blood in his mouth as he worries the inside of his lip, feeling the twisting of her form as she struggles to keep her shape consistent.

The rest is blurry and only half-remembered, like something out of a dream.

When he becomes more aware of himself again, he finds himself sitting propped up in a bed in a much too crowded hospital room. There’s an IV in his arm attached to a bag of saline. He can feel Sabine curled up against his chest under his hospital gown, but their Tether still feels tender so he can't determine if she's managing to keep her chameleon shape. She feels like the right size for it and she isn't moving, but that's all he can tell. Jack is there, standing off to the side giving some kind of instructions to Price, Zeller, and Beverly. An Alpha doctor in his early middle age with a short, perfectly sculpted salt-and-pepper beard stands by the bed, looking at a clipboard with open disinterest. His little brown bat daemon sits perched on his shoulder.

"Unless you have any further questions?" the doctor asks, drumming his fingers impatiently against the wooden table at Will's bedside.

Will frowns. Given the doctor's words, he must have been being briefed about his condition, but he can't remember anything about it. "I think I lost time," he says, uncertain. "Do I have a concussion?"

Jack goes quiet abruptly, turning to look at the doctor. The doctor must catch the movement out of the corner of his eye because he tilts his head slightly to return Jack's look. "Disorientation and haziness is very common in concussions," he says. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"Maybe you could try talking to *me* instead of my boss," Will growls. "I'm not a child."

The doctor turns back to Will and gives him a very unimpressed look. "So are mood swings and general irritability."

It's a good thing Will isn't attached to a blood pressure monitor. If he was, he knows it would be shrieking right now.

"Yes, you have a concussion," the doctor says as if he's already said that several times. Maybe he has. “Nothing else immediately suspicious besides some mild dehydration. Hence the IV we’ve hooked you up to.”

"So I had a… what, a CT scan? An MRI?"

"Unnecessary. You're presenting with very normal symptoms for a concussion. Agent Crawford informed us that you live alone, so we're going to keep you overnight for observation to make sure your condition doesn't deteriorate. A nurse will evaluate you tomorrow for a possible afternoon release, but other than that you'll be free to recover at home. Any questions?"

After how much of a nightmare today has been, the last thing Will wants is to be observed. He wants to go home, to ensure he's alone, and let Sabine thrash and spasm through multiple shapes to get out the terror and frustration he knows she must be feeling despite the disconnect in their Tether.

"When I try to talk through my Tether to my daemon, I get a splitting pain in my head…"

"Also normal for a concussion," the doctor interrupts. "Numbness or discomfort when attempting innerspeak is one of the defining features of a brain injury, and one of the first to heal for something like a concussion. It should wear off fully sometime in the next few hours. If it's still present in the morning, we can run further tests."

The idea of further tests gives Will pause before he asks about some of the other oddities he's been experiencing prior to the concussion. The time that he snapped at Alana because he said what Sabine was thinking out loud, a few brief moments where their connection felt like that of a bad phone line. Those couldn't be explained by a hit to the head. But he doesn't dare bring them up. What if they are mystery symptoms that can only be traced to Sabine being unsettled? The harrowing ache that stabs through him at the idea of more people finding his secret decides things for him. He keeps it to himself.

"Then I don't have any more questions," he says, leaning his head back against the hospital bed and looking up at the ceiling. The light hurts his eyes and they flinch shut.

"The fact that you seem to be able to carry on a conversation is a good sign," the doctor says. Will hears him flip through the pages on his clipboard followed by the sharp clack of expensive shoes against the clean tile floor. "I'll have a nurse come later to take your vitals before bed. In the meantime, you can take visitors."

Will turns his head away from the ceiling to glare at the doctor's back as he leaves. Once the doctor is out of the room, he gets swarmed by Jack, Beverly, Price, and Zeller, along with their daemons.

"We need to talk, Will."

"How's your head?"

"Probably no complaints so far!"

"Shut up, Jimmy."

Will holds up his hands and gestures for them to back off, scowling at the overstimulation. "One at a time," he grumbles.

Jack gives his team a pointed look to let them know that he has priority before he turns his intense stare to Will. "What happened? Be specific "

For several minutes, Will recounts everything from his arrival at Alana's house up through Gideon's death and Chilton's intercision. He keeps a few things vague and outright omits anything and everything having to do with Gideon's accomplice discovering that Sabine is unsettled. All he can do is draw upon his years of secrecy and hope that it's enough to convince one of the FBI's top agents.

"And you're sure you didn't see his face?" Jack asks sternly.

"Yes. He had on some kind of disguise. A mask, maybe," Will lies.

"Maybe," Jack repeats, his voice flat and unimpressed. "His voice, then. Could you recognize him that way?"

"Jack, you know that the concussion makes any identification I could make suspect at best. Even if I somehow picked the right person, and believe me that is a big if, relying on my compromised testimony would be handing the defense an acquittal on a silver platter."

Jack shakes his head, and he heaves a frustrated sigh. He rubs his broad hand against the back of his neck. "No, you're right," he admits. "I just want to get this guy, Will. It's a miracle that he let you go relatively unharmed, considering what happened with…"

"Chilton," Will interrupts. "Is he… is he still alive?"

The grim, heavy silence that follows tells Will everything.

"He's not *dead*," Zeller says. "But he might be better off if he was."

"Last I heard he was being released from this hospital to some kind of special care facility for people with really intense or weird daemon conditions. I overheard one of the nurses who was caring for him talk about it on the phone with someone named… something like Southcliff," Beverly says.

"That would be Dr. Donald Sutcliffe."

Jack, Beverly, Price, and Zeller all turn to face the door, parting slightly from where they have crowded around Will. Hannibal stands in the doorway holding something held in a tidy fabric wrapping in one hand. Aušrinė sits perched on his left shoulder, her dark feathers puffed out and her intelligent eyes gleaming as they stare across the room at Will.

"He's been a colleague for quite some time," Hannibal continues as he steps forward into the room. "Poor Dr. Chilton will receive excellent care under his supervision."

"Dr. Lecter," Jack says. There's a small degree of surprise in his voice. "I don't remember contacting you to let you know about the situation."

"The news is justifiably abuzz with the story. Given that Will was late for this evening's appointment, it was easy for me to guess he was the unnamed FBI agent being discussed across countless news agencies. From there, it was just a matter of reaching out to my contacts in the local healthcare system."

Will groans. "How long until Lounds or someone like her sees to it that I don't stay unnamed?"

Seeing Will be aware and responsive enough to complain must make some of Aušrinė's obvious tension fade. With a graceful stretch, her feathers smooth down slightly against her body. Hannibal smiles as well.

"Perhaps longer than you'd suspect," he says. "Apparently the agents who scoured Mr. Snyder's property found his little black book as well as a hidden surveillance camera in his foyer. Your presence in this story will likely be overshadowed by Mr. Snyder's very important guests. On my drive here, I was listening to a news report state that a Senator, three members of the House of Representatives and two governors have already resigned ahead of the coming scandal."

"Guess Snyder wasn't bluffing about the blackmail material after all," Will murmurs, mostly to himself. He turns to Jack. "Do we have an idea how many victims they intercised?"

"None whatsoever. We'll probably have a clearer idea in the coming days. I'm sure plenty of those who have been implicated will be eager to try to point fingers as they seek deals with prosecutors," Jack says. "It's not like there have been any reports of living intercised people showing up in care facilities. We would have been tipped off about it."

"For most people, seeing someone who has been intercised brings up feelings of…"

Will pauses as his mind provides him with a far-too-clear image of Chilton in the silver guillotine. He swallows heavily, trying to clear himself of the unwelcome sight.

"Of immediate, bone-deep disgust," he continues, his voice raw. "But there are always plenty of exceptions to even the most widely-reported biological or psychological 'rule'. And two of the most common reactions to being intercised are psychological vacancy and physical malleability. Qualities that some may find… valuable."

"Trafficking," Jack says.

Will gives a small, grim nod. "Most of them are likely to be Omegas. Some probably barely settled. The majority will be minorities. All homeless or deeply impoverished, the kind of person who has to struggle tirelessly to keep from slipping through the hungry, cavernous cracks in society and into the grinding teeth of the maw below."

The room is silent for a moment, and Will can't bring himself to look at anyone else. He focuses on his hands in his lap, finding that they are clenched so tightly that if his nails were any longer he'd likely be digging bloody crescents into his palms.

When he dares to hope that the conversation is over, he hears Jack sigh. "Right," Jack says. "Then the next thing we'll need to-"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Agent Crawford," Hannibal says, his voice firm but not unkind, "but I think it would be best if you wrap up this meeting for the evening. Will has gone through a very traumatic event, and I would like to discuss his psychological state with him privately before he has a long and well-deserved rest. Pushing him to the breaking point tonight would be counterproductive and, more importantly, inhumane."

Jack turns his attention from Will to Hannibal. He gives the other Alpha a long, appraising look, and for a moment Will fears he's about to have a front-row seat to a tedious Alpha pissing contest. Fortunately, Jack blinks first.

"Get some rest, Will. We're going to have a lot of mopping up to do over the next few weeks," he says. He heads for the door with Themis herding the rest of the forensics team out behind him.

The door closes, and Will is left alone with Hannibal.

"I don't know if I should thank you or curse you," Will says with a sigh as he leans back against his pillow. "Can't say I'm feeling particularly eager for a psychological deep dive right about now."

"Then it's a good thing I don't expect one," Hannibal says as he moves a visitor's chair closer to Will's bed. "Obviously I would be happy to discuss the matter with you, but I admit my insistence was mostly so you could have a break from Jack's interrogation."

"'Thank you' it is, then."

Hannibal sets the fabric-covered object on Will's bedside table. "You know, Will, if you wanted to get out of my dinner invitation, you didn't have to get yourself kidnapped to do it," he says, a small smile on his lips.

Maybe it's the perfectly dry intonation and timing of Hannibal's remark. Maybe it's the exhaustion and horror of the day fusing together to create a mild hysteria in him. Either way, Will finds himself laughing to the point that he feels light-headed; he blames that dizziness on the concussion.

"Well," Will says as he brings his hand up to cover his eyes in an attempt to ease the swimming sensation in his head, "I'm glad you can find the humor inherent in the situation."

"Have I offended you, Will?"

Will sighs. "No, no, it isn't that-"

"I certainly didn't want to give the impression that what you went through is trivial, or to give you the impression that I wasn't affected by your disappearance," Hannibal says. "When you failed to arrive for dinner on time, weren't answering your phone, and your dogs were clearly unfed, I assure you I was quite affected."

Will's hand slowly slides from its place over his eyes and down his face. He looks over to Hannibal, but his eyes flicker away when he sees the serious expression on the Alpha's face. "You went all the way to my house?" he asks, at a loss for what else to say.

"And Alana's, since you said earlier today that you would be there briefly. I fed your dogs before I went to see if you were there, only to find evidence of a struggle and some fresh blood. I wasn't sure if it was yours or your assailant's."

"Mm. To be honest, I'm not either," Will mutters, thinking back Gideon spitting out his mouthful of blood and the nosebleed he'd suffered from getting knocked unconscious. "But the blood reminds me of something."

"Oh?"

"The clothes I was wearing before I got to the hospital should be folded up on that chair by the window. There's something there I need to return to you. I'd get up and do it myself, but, well," he says, gesturing irritably to the IV in his arm. "The pants, in the back left pocket."

Will watches as Hannibal follows his instructions, taking the bloodstained handkerchief from the pocket. The Alpha's expression is as controlled and reserved as ever, but Will does detect a subtle flaring of his nostrils. Aušrinė's claws clench tighter against the fabric of Hannibal's jacket.

"Sorry I couldn't return it in better condition," Will says. "I had a pretty bad nosebleed after Gideon's accomplice knocked me out."

"It's not a problem," Hannibal says, tucking the handkerchief away in a pocket within the lining of his jacket. "I can easily get the blood out. I often work with fresh meat, after all."

"Is that what you brought with you?" Will asks, glancing at the fabric-covered item Hannibal had left on the table by the hospital bed.

Hannibal gives him a slight smile. "Am I that predictable?"

“If I can’t come to dinner, clearly the only option is to bring the dinner to me.”

“Perfectly put. During one of our recent phone conversations, you mentioned you were eating bad canned soup. It inspired me to elevate the concept,” Hannibal says. With a few deft movements, he unwraps the fabric, revealing sets of utensils and two tightly sealed containers stacked atop each other. He places them side by side and removes their lids. Inside is a soup composed of a very fragrant broth and meat Will doesn’t immediately recognize.

“It’s so dark.”

“Silky chicken, a breed from China known for its black meat and medicinal value. Simmered in a broth of wolfberries, ginger, ginseng, red dates, and star anise.”

“You know, when most people say they’re ‘elevating’ some basic comfort food, it just means they’re adding an egg to it. Soft-boiling one in a bowl of instant ramen, or frying one to place atop a greasy burger,” Will says. He accepts one of the containers from Hannibal along with a spoon. “I’m pretty sure this and a bog standard can of chicken noodle soup aren’t even in the same atmospheric layer.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The idea of eating doesn't sound terribly appealing, but not necessarily due to any nausea brought on by the concussion. Only a few spoonfuls in and he feels the food sitting harsh and heavy in his stomach like a rock. It’s delicious; the flavors are sharp and pungent in a way that comes across as more interesting and refreshing than intimidating. But there’s something that’s eating at him, just as he tries in vain to eat the soup.

There’s someone out there who knows the truth about Sabine, and that someone happily assisted in the severing of two people through the use of a silver guillotine. Even if that man has never personally killed someone, Will considers it a matter of semantics. The man he encountered today has done far worse to the bond between a person and their demon, the true soul of an individual, than he ever could to the meat that keeps that soul alive. Will knows that as long as someone like that is out there and aware of Sabine, he won’t be feeling true comfort until he has permanently resolved the problem. One way or another..

Something terrible comes to him as he slowly swirls the spoon through the broth. It’s the stomach-churning, spine-chilling specter of hope. That maybe he doesn’t have to deal with this fresh new hell he’s in on his own. If someone else knew about Sabine, he wouldn’t be alone. It would be him and someone he trusted against Gideon’s accomplice. Safety in numbers, just as Alana suggested the last time he saw her.

It could be Hannibal.

He swallows heavily. “Hannibal,” he begins, keeping his eyes on his hands as they grip his hospital gown. They’re white and shaking like the skeletal branches of a birch tree in a late autumn wind. “I…”

No, Sabine hisses through the Tether. Their connection is returned, but it feels raw and staticy in Will’s head. *No, no, no, no, no, no, NO.*

She provides him with a barrage of images. His father, drunk to the point of delirium and ranting that Sabine being able to change shape was just a bad dream. The Witch he met when he sought answers in his mother's territory, recoiling in disgust and terror. The only two beings on Earth who had ever seen him for what he truly was. His father had fortunately forgotten the ordeal after blacking out, or at least pretended he forgot for the rest of his life. The Witch had said she'd kill him as an abomination if she ever saw him again.

Sabine presents him with an image of Hannibal and Aušrinė as repulsed as his father and the Witch. The Alpha's face isn't contorted with cartoonish disgust, but there's a coldness and distaste in his eyes that is somehow even worse. That twitching little larval hope curls up and dies in Will's chest.

I can't see that. Can't let them think of me like that, Sabine says, her voice faint and defeated.*Please.*

"Yes, Will?" Hannibal asks.

Will is quiet for a moment. "I think I'm still nauseous from the concussion," he murmurs.

Of course Hannibal is obliging and understanding. Of course he stays to give Will some more encouraging words. Of course he graciously and happily offers the opportunity for a replacement dinner as soon as Will's appetite has returned. Of course he stays until a nurse comes and clears Will as safe to sleep for the night. Of course.

Will doesn't lose any time between lying to Hannibal and lying alone in the pathetic half-light that passes for the dark in his hospital room. Part of him wishes he did.

He drifts off slowly and only barely feels Sabine twitch against his body.

How did Hannibal get into the house to feed the dogs? Sabine slurs blearily through their Tether. *He gave back the house key he used while we were in Death Valley.*

Already on the precipice of sleep, Will is too exhausted to have an answer. When he wakes the next day, neither he nor Sabine will have any memory of her question.

A Party

Chapter Notes

> It's back! And it only took almost... another... year. Hm. Fingers crossed that the next chapter won't also take that long. It should be shorter than this one, but I've said that and been hilariously wrong before. Thank you all so much for your patience with these slow as all hell updates. We're now in the latter half of the story, though, and I have a fair bit of some of the final chapters already written. You can follow occasional status updates at my twitter @rosenritter42.
>
> This chapter has some payoff for things that were introduced in chapters 8 and 9. It's not major, but if you wanted a refresher, those would be handy.
>
> The next chapter, An Exaltation, will be out as soon as possible. Once again, thank you all so much, and I hope the next wait won't be so long.

It’s just past midnight when Hannibal and Aušrinė arrive home after visiting Will in the hospital. The wealthy neighborhood they live in is still and silent as the grave, with only the warm glow of the streetlights and porch lights glowing in the dark autumn night. Once they enter the kitchen, Aušrinė is nearly giddy as she flies to the island and bounces from spot to spot while Hannibal goes about putting away the leftovers from his mostly failed attempt to feed Will dinner.

“Your excitement is charming,” Hannibal says as he closes the refrigerator.

Aušrinė scoffs. “As if you’re not just as eager.”

Hannibal smiles but does not debate her on the matter. “What shall it be, then?” he asks. “Perhaps a full-bodied coffee? Czernina? Black pudding?”

Aušrinė ruffles her feathers and shakes her head. “Oh, don’t tease. You know the first taste must be as pure as we can get it. Once we know the exact flavor profile we’re working with, then we can consider future recipe options.”

“I admire your confidence that we can obtain more.”

“We could acquire nearly a gallon and a half of it right now if we really put our mind to it. But in the long term that would be an absolute waste.”

Hannibal unbuttons his suit jacket and reaches into a pocket in the lining. He removes the handkerchief that Will had returned to him earlier in the evening and runs a gentle thumb over the Omega’s dried blood soaked into the fabric.

Aušrinė watches as he fills a delicate glass tea kettle with purified water and sets it to boil on the stovetop. “So,” she says, her tone light and breezy, “what do you think he really wanted to tell us? He wouldn’t hesitate that long if it was really just about nausea brought on by the concussion.”

“It could have been anything, from something as likely and mundane as what he ultimately told us all the way to something decidedly less probable. Something ardent,” Hannibal says, glancing at his daemon. He sees the small feathers at the top of her head rise, and he doesn’t need to be connected to her via their Tether to know the impact his suggestion has had on her. “At this point, I think we can safely say that Will and his Sabine are difficult to fully predict.”

“Thrilling, isn’t it?” Aušrinė murmurs.

Hannibal’s lips twitch into a small smile, but it doesn’t stay long. He turns his attention back to the kettle on the stovetop. There are miniscule bubbles forming in the water at the bottom. As soon as they begin to dance into each other and spiral to the surface, he turns the heat off. He lifts the lid and drops in the bloodstained handkerchief. The cloth dances as the boiling recedes.

He finds it hard to look away as the water gradually turns from clear to a delicate pink to a darker red. Not all of the blood will leave the handkerchief, and the heat from the water will only set the stains into the fabric. But Hannibal only considers that another positive. Even after the flavor is long filed away in the ever-expanding wing he has dedicated to Will Graham in his memory, he will have the ghost of the Omega’s blood imprinted on the handkerchief.

“Would you care to wet your beak?” Hannibal asks Aušrinė.

“As much as I enjoy indulging, it isn’t something nature equipped me to do. No need for daemons to have a strong sense of taste if we aren’t meant to eat. Fortunately, I can take advantage of your palate, just as you can take advantage of my ability to fly.”

She watches as Hannibal pours the blood-infused water into a teacup. “And just how you want to feel every surge of wind beneath my wings, I want to savor every last drop,” she concludes.

Hannibal raises the cup in toast. “To the first taste of many,” he says. He then brings it to his lips and has his first real taste of Will Graham.

Even piteously diluted, the flavor is beyond anything Hannibal has experienced in his long life of exploring all aspects of the culinary experience. He struggles to find the right description - the tart-sweet of pomegranate arils? The light acidic tang of yuzu? The hint of saltiness and inherent buttery sweetness of a fresh scallop plucked from the sea? None of these, alone or in tandem, can come close to summarizing the taste of Will Graham on his tongue, but they’re what he finds when he grasps blindly for the right comparison.

Strangely, the closest thing he can come up with to describe it isn’t even a flavor at all. It’s an experience, one he had nearly twenty years before. He remembers the glittering, unfamiliar stars above him obscured by the impossible, writhing dark shape in the sky over the Witch

lands in Hokkaido, the thing that had made him feel as if he were in the presence of God as he took part in the ritual that would make his Tether with Aušrinė limitless. The feeling of being in front of something beautiful and incomprehensible.

He must have more of it. And he will, in due time.

*****

The week following Will's incident with Gideon and Chilton and his subsequent hospitalization is shockingly dull, considering everything that led up to it.

Per his discharge from the hospital, Will has been put on a two week mandatory medical leave from both teaching and fieldwork. Hannibal had offered to come by Will's home to check up on him, or - even better - to have the Omega stay with him in Baltimore for his recovery. But Will had adamantly and immediately declined, stressing that he was never going to actually relax and recover unless he was completely alone.

That also came with Will cancelling his weekly session with Hannibal.

Knowing that there will be no meeting with Will to look forward to for the week adds a layer of grim boredom to Hannibal's schedule. Worse still, on the day that he would normally have Will's evening appointment, Franklyn Froideveaux has booked a double-length therapy session. When Hannibal had approved the request weeks ago, he had the promise of a conversation with Will at the end of the day to wash away the tedium of all that time spent with Franklyn. Now he sits at his desk with his day planner open before him, trying to decide how to clean up the mess his past self has left for him.

"Didn't we also agree to it because we intended to kill Franklyn the day before?" Aušrinė asks from her perch on the back of his chair. She stretches her wings and pretends to groom feathers that don't actually need any cleaning. "It isn't like us to miss a deadline."

"That's what we get for focusing so much on all the political fallout of Will's misadventure, and the chaotic scramble to see who will occupy Chilton's throne in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

"Mm, I suspect Alana will be the last one standing. Though what you told Jack when he asked us why we weren't in the running was funny..."

Hannibal joins her, and they speak in unison, "'Frankly, Jack, you'll only find me in that place if you lock me up there.'"

Hannibal chuckles and taps the tip of his pen against Franklyn's entry in his weekly planner. He could call the nervous Beta and cancel his appointment, but he suspects Franklyn would just beg to have his double length session moved instead of cancelled outright.

"Unfortunately, I don't think we'd have enough time to find and kill Franklyn. We only have thirty minutes before he gets here, and accomplishing a feat like that in such a short span of time is a bit of a stretch, even for us. We'll just have to take the hit," Hannibal says.

Aušrinė sighs dramatically. “You know, *I* don’t have to be here while you put up with Franklyn. At least one of us should have a good time if both of us can’t.”

“Yearning for a flight to a certain homestead in northern Virginia?”

“Ah, you know me so well.”

“It has been a while since you made the trip,” Hannibal muses, “and Will’s health is in such a precarious state right now.”

“Leaving Will unsupervised would be a dereliction of our duty as a health professional. Irresponsible. Heartless.”

Hannibal’s lips curl up slightly at the edges, not quite crossing the line into the territory that could classify it as a full smile. He stands from his desk and makes his way to the nearest window. Moving swiftly, he pulls aside the curtains and slides the window open. There’s a thick mist outside, and the smell of damp fallen leaves washes over him as he takes in a breath of the autumn air.

He barely has time to gesture to the open window before his daemon flies past him and careens up and out into the air. He gives a little huff of amusement at her eagerness and closes the window behind her.

With just under half an hour before Franklyn is set to arrive, Hannibal goes about the preparations he must take to hide the fact that his daemon will be miles and miles away for the better part of the day. He opens a storage closet and removes an ornate bird cage and a black velvet covering. Although Aušrinė does not indulge herself in long flights in the middle of a work day regularly, she has gone roaming enough times that Hannibal has pinpointed the best spot in his office to set the decoy cage. Placed in the center of his office, he has just enough space to move in any given direction and plausibly be within the length of a slightly longer than normal Tether.

He positions the cage and makes adjustments so minor that they can’t be much longer than half an inch. Satisfied, he throws the cover over the cage, ready but certainly not eager to endure his next patient.

*****

The most obnoxious downside to the ruse is that, no matter how many times he sees it upon his arrival, Franklyn feels compelled to remark upon the cage.

“Oh!” Franklyn says as he sits in the chair opposite Hannibal. “Keeping your daemon under wraps again today?”

“You wanted a longer session than usual, Franklyn,” Hannibal says. “Why allow any form of distraction if you clearly need more time to speak?”

Franklyn’s face flushes, and his little dog daemon slumps sheepishly at his feet. “Uh, true, good point.”

“Shall we begin?” Hannibal suggests, but even as he says it, he is already beginning to tune the Beta out in order to focus on Aušrinė’s journey.

As Franklyn attempts to impress Hannibal by rambling on for nearly the entirety of his two hour session about a new ‘friend’ who works with the Baltimore opera, Aušrinė soars over the city as it gives way to the larger lawns, golf courses, and sprawling parks of the suburbs that stretch from Baltimore to the outskirts of Washington D.C. Hannibal can feel the chilly air as it buoys his daemon up above the landscape, and the temperature only seems to drop further after she makes her way closer to the Potomac. It’s a strange weather pattern, and Hannibal can only idly wonder if the climate of the area is somehow reflecting Will Graham’s dour mood as he heals up in Wolf Trap.

It’s an irrational thought, of course. Just because Will was born from a Witch doesn’t make him one. But to the part of Hannibal prone to romanticism and whimsy - the same part of him that is now riding the brisk wind and making excellent time for it - it’s a tempting thought nonetheless.

We should do this every time we have a session with Franklyn, Hannibal ponders through their Tether as he turns his focus back to his office. Aloud, he says, “And that’s your time, Franklyn.”

Franklyn looks slightly disappointed. “Already?” he asks and checks his watch. “Wow, time flies when you’re having a good time, right?”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe my next session could be as long as-”

“I’m sorry, Franklyn, but I only agreed to a single session of this length because you said that you desperately needed the extra time. How would you feel if one of my other patients began to take up all of my time and focus?”

“Well, if they really needed it as much as I do-”

“It’s a no, Franklyn,” Hannibal says.

“What about if I just come a little bit earlier than usual for my session next week?”

Hannibal is silent for a moment as he stares at Franklyn, thinking of all the ways he has ever considered killing the man. He even thinks of just getting it over with here and now in his office. But he has been following the shipping information of a package he is very keen to receive, and it’s currently out for delivery and could arrive at any time. The last thing he needs is a knock on the door just as he breaks Franklyn’s neck.

“I’m afraid not. Have a good afternoon, Franklyn.”

Once the Beta is finally gone, Hannibal focuses his attention back on Aušrinė. He has several hours before he expects his next patient, so he has plenty of time to see the world through her eyes without distraction.

On a clear day, Aušrinė would be able to see Will's little house from a distance as she makes her descent, but the fog is now so thick that it's little more than a blurred shape in the mist. The same goes for the barn where Will keeps spare parts for tinkering; the building is just a vague, dark blur in the sea of gray.

Aušrinė begins at the house, where she lands in the little bush near one of the windows. On some of her prior visits, the spot has given her the best views of Will and Sabine as they sleep, but she has also begun to draw the attention of the dogs there. She'll have to take care to not be noticed by Will's little pack.

Peering through the window, she finds Will's bed unmade and empty, save for one of his dogs - a little terrier - lying curled up and napping in the dishevelled sheets. One of his eyes opens and rolls to look at the window, and his tail starts to thump lazily against the bedding. Aušrinė flits up and away out of sight.

She spends a good twenty minutes carefully making her way around the windows of Will's home, but finds no evidence of him inside. His car is parked in its usual place, so he can't be out running errands. He could be out for a walk in the more heavily forested areas of his property, but with the visibility so low that seems like little more than a recipe for twisting an ankle on a gnarled tree root.

Eventually she settles on the roof, hoping the height will give her a new perspective on her search. After a few minutes on the roof, she hears a shuffling sound from the general location of the barn, followed by Will's voice muttering profanity. She takes off and alights on the bough of a maple tree beside the barn, its leaves fully blushed blood red and soon to fall.

Will stands outside the open door of his weather-beaten barn. His normal stubble is dangerously close to becoming a scraggly beard, and that together with the dark bags beneath his eyes give him a haggard appearance. His dark hair is especially wild and unkempt. He stares out into the fog, eyes stormy and face unreadable. His right hand holds a shotgun, though his grip is so loose that the firearm could easily fall from his twitching fingers.

Taking care to stay out of Will's line of sight, Aušrinė flutters over to the roof of the barn. There are no windows, so she roams across the roof searching for a hole or crack in the aging, weather-beaten wood. It takes time, but she finally finds a gap just large enough to look through into the darkness below.

She can't see anything inside the barn besides vague shadows and Will's silhouette where he stands at the entrance. She takes her time observing the darkness inside, and it's only with that intense scrutiny that she begins to see one of the shadows shift. Whatever it is, its hulking body knocks against something metallic, causing a loud clattering sound. Will startles and turns to face the inside of the barn. His grip tightens on his gun. Even though his face is completely obscured by shadow, there's a sense of profound sadness and exhaustion in his posture.

Hannibal and Aušrinė know that Will doesn't keep animals besides dogs. Aušrinė has never seen anything else on her flights to Wolf Trap, and during his visits to feed Will's dogs, Hannibal's sensitive nose has never detected a trace of the potent smells associated with

keeping chickens or livestock. Perhaps the creature in Will's barn is some sick and dying wild animal, and now Will must steel himself to put it out of its misery.

Hannibal's long distance focus is suddenly interrupted by a quiet creaking sound. For a moment, the office is quiet enough to hear a pin drop; if he were the sort of person who made hasty errors in perception, he would just be starting to relax and imagine that the sound was all in his head.

But he is not that sort of person, so he stands and reaches for one of the scalpels he uses to sharpen his pencils. The cold metal presses into the palm of his hand. He slips off his shoes, carrying with them as he moves silently to the entrance of the office. He breathes in long and slow to scent the air.

There's a fresh, young scent nearby. It reminds him of the first grass that peeks through the barely thawed ground of late winter. Unpresented. Abigail.

Best begin the return trip, he thinks to Aušrinė. *We have company.*

Aušrinė grumbles something about missing the confrontation between Will and the animal hidden in his barn, but begins her return flight regardless. She expects to hear the loud, echoing bang of Will's shotgun euthanizing the beast. But, oddly, it never comes.

Hannibal slips his shoes back on and waits a moment longer to intercept Abigail, curious to know what the girl will choose to do. Perhaps she'll turn away and wander back out into the city. But when he hears the tentative *tok-tok* of hooves against the wood floor of the waiting room, he smiles.

"Come in, Abigail."

A spike of panic adds a sour, gamey note to her scent. It dissipates quickly, however, and Hannibal is once again impressed by how quickly the girl can process unwanted surprises. It only takes a few seconds for her to arrive at the doorway between the waiting room and the interior of the office. She stops there, partially obscured by the door frame. She is paler than the last time Hannibal saw her, and her light blue eyes are rimmed red with dark bags beneath them.

"How did you know it was me?"

"None of my patients have daemons with hooves."

She scowls slightly and her eyes dart down to stare at the floor. Her slim fingers come up to lightly touch the scarf around her neck, just above the spot where her father tried to slit her throat. She glimpses up, her mouth open to speak, but no words come. Her brows furrow as she takes in the room and notices a glaring omission. "Where's your daemon?"

Hannibal gestures to the birdcage in the center of the room. "Many of my patients have traumas or anxieties pertaining to how their daemons are perceived by others. I find that they can be less distracted and stressed with Aušrinė happily tucked away during their appointments," he explains. He tilts his head, noting that Abigail's own daemon has not

joined her in the doorway. “Perhaps you can understand how they feel. I imagine Melinoë is feeling quite scrutinized lately.”

Abigail’s thin fingers curl against the doorframe. “She’s why I came.”

She moves into the office, wincing as she starts to pull at the length of her Tether. It’s clear her daemon does not want to expose herself to Hannibal’s curious gaze. Abigail frowns, and Hannibal can only imagine what bitter conversation is flashing back and forth between the girl and her daemon. With an awkward lurch, she finally moves further into the office with Melinoë sulking behind her. The daemon is still stuck in the form of an elk fawn, but now antlers have sprouted from her head. Although not the large rack of antlers seen on a fully grown elk, they are clearly big enough to do significant damage in a pinch.

“You said it was temporary,” Abigail says quietly. “That… that she’d get unstuck eventually with therapy. But she’s only gotten worse. Female elk don’t grow antlers.”

She laughs bitterly and continues, “She’s been irregular my whole life. You’d think I’d be used to being a freak.”

Hannibal moves to stand by the girl as tears threaten to fall from her exhausted eyes. “It’s normal to feel upset and unmoored in a situation like yours. Growing up with an irregular daemon has given you resiliency, but it has not made you numb to the weight of society’s narrow expectations,” he says. “And that’s exactly what people who think less of a daemon like yours, Abigail. Narrow. Limited.”

“I didn’t come here for sympathy,” Abigail says. She takes a moment to press her lips together into a tight line before she continues, “I came to find out what to do. You said that your daemon had a lock-down response and that it took a few weeks to clear up. It’s been weeks and weeks since… since Minnesota. Why is she still stuck? What did you do that I haven’t done?”

At her pleading, Hannibal considers his own “lock-down”. It had begun the moment the men charged into his bedroom in the early hours of his sixteenth birthday, the moment Mischa screamed and recoiled from the invaders. Aušrinė had snapped into the form of a raven and immediately began to use her strong, prominent beak and sharp claws to peck and tear at the assailants and their daemons, not caring at all if she touched any of the men themselves and broke the taboo. The adrenaline and severity of the situation had triggered an early rut in him, albeit one dedicated to protecting his sister and property instead of being near a potential mate to claim.

The combination of flooding hormones and the deafening rush of his own blood in his ears had made the immediate moments of his settling and the fight with the invaders hazy, and even his impeccable memory cannot recover all of it. Although the rut had given him a frenetic violence - enough to kill one of the group - it had not been enough. He had still been a boy, prematurely settled and presented and not nearly fully grown. He had failed. After they had knocked him out, after Mischa met her end, after they had left him to die and he had refused the whispering temptation of the embrace of death, it had taken him nearly a month to realize Aušrinė couldn’t change her form anymore.

It had taken him years to catch, kill, and consume the remaining assailants and imprison their ringleader, years past when Aušrinė would have settled naturally on his eighteenth birthday. Now that the sole survivor of the invaders lies languishing and caged in the very home he helped destroy, Hannibal wishes the man an uncommonly long life; his Witch-born jailer will stay young and seemingly ageless no matter how long her prisoner lasts.

“Every situation is different,” Hannibal says. “But in my case, it required resolving some of the trauma that caused the lock-down response. I was hoping that therapy would be enough to help you reach that resolution, and it’s very possible that it still could be. But…”

“But you don’t know how long therapy alone will take to do it,” Abigail accuses. She lets out a little sound that could be a sob or a grim laugh. “Of course.”

“Have a seat, Abigail. I’ll get you some water and we can discuss this further.”

The girl moves toward the chair reserved for his patients. On Hannibal’s way out of the office, he sees Melinoë staring at the shrouded bird cage.

It takes less than a minute to prepare a tray with a pitcher of ice water and glasses, but Hannibal lingers. He can estimate the amount of time needed: twenty seconds for Abigail to realize he has moved well out of the range of a normal Tether, forty seconds for her to debate with Melinoë on what to do, forty seconds after that to stand up, ten more to move to the cage, thirteen or so before she looks. He gives her that time and not a second more before he returns to the office. Just as he had expected, Abigail’s fingers twitch away from the fabric covering the bird cage and twist themselves into the plush fabric of the scarf around her scarred neck.

He says nothing. He doesn’t have to. She knows - both what isn’t in the cage and that she has been caught spying. He simply chooses silence, curious what option she will take to navigate the situation.

“The morning my dad tried to kill me, I saw a bird acting strangely around his truck. It hid in the bed, almost like it knew what it was doing. The way a daemon would. But there was nobody around in Tether distance, so I thought that couldn’t possibly be right. Something made my dad snap that day. I’ve been thinking a lot about what the final straw was.”

“And you have an idea?” Hannibal asks as he sets the tray down on his desk. He pours two glasses of water and hands one to Abigail before making his way to sit across from her.

“I had suspicions,” Abigail says, eying her glass warily. She watches as Hannibal takes a sip from his own glass. She follows suit after a moment, and though she is clearly trying to keep her cool, she nearly drains the glass in one go. “But now I have data.”

“Then it seems we have some air to clear,” Hannibal says.

“Where’s your daemon?” the girl demands.

“Out for a flight. She likes to stretch her wings from time to time.”

“How? Only Witches can do that.”

“Only Witches know *how* to do it. I knew a wayward Witch in my youth, and learned the process from her. With a great deal of personal strength and dedication, it’s possible for mere humans like ourselves to accomplish it.”

He can see the thought as it unfurls behind Abigail’s eyes like the petals and tendrils of some rare hothouse orchid. It’s delicate, easily destroyed or wilted if not properly cultivated. Hannibal will tend to it with utmost care.

Most teenagers Abigail’s age - brash and inexperienced creatures with little knowledge about how to navigate the choppy waters of interpersonal interaction - wouldn’t be able to resist blurting out what Abigail is clearly thinking. *Tell me how.* But though she is still so young, she has had to learn, far earlier and more dramatically than most, how to tread lightly. She will take a more circuitous route.

“It was your daemon at my house that morning. Why did she ride off in my dad’s truck?” she asks. “What did she do?”

“I was present when the FBI honed in on your father as a suspect. Things were moving quickly, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before his capture. It was a rare opportunity, knowing what was coming and that my daemon could interview him prior to the event.”

Abigail tilts her head, keeping her blue eyes on him. She reaches out and idly strokes the short hair on the back of Melinoë’s long neck. “Sounds like something that could get you in trouble with your oversight board.”

Atta girl, Hannibal thinks, keeping the proud smile off of his lips. “Indeed, it does.”

“Maybe I just saw a normal bird acting a little strangely. I could be convinced of that, with some help.”

“Birds are certainly very peculiar creatures,” Hannibal agrees. “And of course, I’m happy to help you in any way that I can.”

Abigail drops all pretense. “Teach me and Melinoë to do what your daemon does.”

Hannibal hums in thought, as if he is actually considering rejecting the demand. “I’m only aware of the process working when the daemon has already settled as a bird. There was a case that Will worked while you were still in your coma. A young man who recently settled tried the ritual and immediately died. He was altogether ill-prepared, but the fact that his daemon wasn’t a bird may have contributed to his fate.”

“Well,” Melinoë says, the word icy and measured and her voice rough from disuse, “it’s a good thing I’m still unsettled.”

Hannibal smiles. “Then I consider it an honor to teach the two of you. The first step will be resolving your lock-down. I suspect you’re still experiencing it because, subconsciously, you haven’t reached closure on your trauma.”

“My dad was a serial killer who murdered girls who looked like me. He killed my mom. He tried to kill me. What’s more closed than that?” Abigail says, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away from Hannibal.

The slight tremble to her brow and the way her fingers dig into the fabric of her sleeves give her away. There’s more to it than that, whether or not Abigail is consciously aware of it. Hannibal regards her for a moment, saying nothing.

“Well?” Abigail snaps.

“I think you need to return to your home in Minnesota,” Hannibal says. “To be in the space where your life fell apart. You’re detached from the physicality of that place, of that moment. Trying to put it behind you feels hollow because you’re trying to grasp at faded ghosts.”

“They don’t want me to. Superstitious religious stuff about my dad’s Dust ‘tainting’ me since I’m still unsettled. As if I don’t already feel tainted by it all.”

“Pure superstation, just as you said. All cases of alleged ‘impure Dust’ impacting the behavior of unsettled children can be explained as psychosomatic. The trauma itself is the agent of change in behavior, not the Dust itself. But even if it were all true and you could be infected by the scattered Dust of your father’s fallen daemon, enough time has passed that all but a few grains of that Dust will have naturally flowed back into the environment by now,” Hannibal says. “And, whoever ‘they’ are, they have competition who feel quite the opposite.”

Abigail’s eyes land on him again, narrowed with suspicion but curious. “Who?”

“Jack Crawford would certainly be interested in getting you to Minnesota.”

“Well, he’ll have to fight Alana Bloom over it,” Abigail grumbles. “I think she’d be happy if I never set foot in Minnesota ever again. Wouldn’t have guessed she’d be the superstitious type.”

“She isn’t,” Hannibal says. “Just the protective type.”

As if summoned by their very discussion of her, Alana’s panicked voice suddenly calls out along with the sound of the outside door of Hannibal’s office slamming open. “Abigail? Are you here?”

Hannibal looks to Abigail, who gives a completely unapologetic shrug. “I left a note in my room explaining where I went,” she says. “Just in case something happened to me. So they’d know where to look.”

“Very wise. You never know what dangers could be lurking behind the corner,” Hannibal tells her. He raises his voice and calls out, “In here, Alana.”

Alana bursts into the office, her eyes wide with concern and her breathing heavy. Valerian paces behind her with his feathers ruffled in alarm.

“Oh, thank God,” Alana sighs as she sees that no harm has come to Abigail. She strides up to the girl and puts her hand on Abigail’s shoulder. “What on Earth were you thinking, leaving

without permission and traveling all the way across an unfamiliar city? You could have gotten lost or injured or worse!"

"Alana, I understand your concern and frustration, but the important thing is that Abigail is safe," Hannibal says.

Alana turns to him with a slight start, as if surprised to find Hannibal in his own office. "Yes, of course, but-"

"But I was going crazy at that center!" Abigail interrupts. "Weeks without answers, without progress… if anything, Melinoë has only gotten worse! They don't know what they're doing, at least not in any way that's helpful for me!"

"And you thought Hannibal could help you?" Alana asks. She still looks tense, but her posture is already relaxing, her fear and irritation transitioning into concern and pity. Given how Abigail clenches her jaw, Hannibal isn't sure the girl welcomes the pity more than she did the anger.

"At least he has an idea about what I can do to fix Melinoë."

That makes Alana freeze, and she looks at Hannibal with skepticism on her fair features. "I'm all ears."

"It's clear Abigail feels stuck, both physically and emotionally. That's no way to foster the freedom and flexibility required for her daemon to be able to change again. She can't move on because as far as her psyche is concerned, she hasn't fully processed the event that has trapped her."

"And you suggest…?"

"I suggest Abigail return to her home in Minnesota."

"No. Absolutely not."

"If your concern is the Dust-"

"You know it isn't, Hannibal!" Alana exclaims. She sighs and rubs at the bridge of her nose. "I didn't mean to snap, but I'm definitely not pleased that someone I consider both a colleague and, more importantly, a friend is questioning my professional judgement about what is best for my patient. What you're recommending is too much of a risk. It could reopen old wounds for Abigail."

"And *I* resent that my therapist isn't listening to *me*!" Abigail says. "You say Dr. Lecter doesn't know my situation well enough to know what's best for me. But you think you do? I haven't even seen you in almost two weeks! And the last time I saw you, it was so you could tell me that you might need to stop being my therapist if you end up taking the job at that BSH-whatever nut house! It feels like you're abandoning me as a lost cause!"

"Abigail…" Alana breathes, chastened.

“What if it works?” Abigail says quietly.

“And what if it doesn’t?” Alana replies. Her voice is softer now, and Hannibal can feel her resolution crumbling under Abigail’s onslaught. “What you’re going through is extremely rare, Abigail. We just don’t know if what Hannibal has suggested will work. It could make things much worse.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Abigail says, her words steely despite the exhausted expression on her face. “It’s better than nothing. The longer I’m stuck like this, the more I risk getting stuck permanently. What happens if my eighteenth birthday comes and Melinoë is still… this?”

Alana looks to Abigail’s daemon, and Hannibal watches as her mouth twists into a sympathetic frown as she regards the antlered fawn. “We’ll talk about this more later,” she says. “We need to be getting you back to the center. The staff is furious, and I’m sure the longer you stay away, the angrier they’ll get.”

Abigail grasps onto the armrests of her chair and for a moment Hannibal wonders if the girl is going to make Alana drag her out of the office chair and all. But a grim weariness sweeps over the girl’s features, and she stands, temporarily defeated.

Hannibal follows Alana and Abigail to the office door, and he holds out his arm to block their exit. “May I make one final suggestion before you go?” he asks. Upon seeing Alana’s dubious expression, he offers the most charming smile he has in his reserve. “I promise it isn’t as unorthodox and presumptuous as others I may have made today.”

Despite herself, a small smile makes its way to Alana’s lips. “Fine,” she says. “Since you promised.”

He moves to his desk, which is far enough away from the empty, shrouded bird cage that he fakes a wince to convince Alana that he is pulling a bit at his Tether; as he does so, he hears Abigail cough. Perhaps stifling a chuckle. He resists the urge to smile himself, feeling as if he and Abigail are sharing an inside joke which has sailed over Alana’s head.

He reaches into one of his desk drawers and removes a sturdy envelope with a red wax seal. “I’d like the two of you to have this,” he says as he returns to Alana and Abigail. “As a gesture of goodwill.”

Alana opens the envelope, and her eyes widen in surprise. “Hannibal, these are tickets to the pre-season donor gala at the opera. You must have been waiting all year for these.”

“True. But I have my connections, and there are plenty of strings I can pull. You may very well find me there regardless.”

“Still,” Alana says, her tone uncertain as she regards the tickets, “I’m not sure if Abigail and I can accept these.”

Hannibal’s eyes meet Abigail’s. The two don’t need to say a word to quickly find themselves on the same page. An opportunity for Abigail to be away from the center for a few hours, to

prove her maturity in front of Alana, to fake stability and try to convince her therapist that returning to Minnesota would be productive.

“My mother loved the opera,” Abigail says quietly. “She never actually got to attend a performance. She was hoping to be able to go for her 50th birthday, but…”

She looks down at the floor and closes her eyes. “It would mean a lot if I could go. For her. Since she’ll never have that chance.”

“I still have my concerns, but maybe it could do some good,” Alana says, clearly touched by Abigail’s words. “You could get some fresh air, enjoy a little culture… And I’ll be there with you. If things get too overwhelming, we can always leave.”

Abigail offers Alana a tiny, fragile smile. “Thank you. And I’m sorry for running off today. I know you only want the best for me.”

Hannibal has to resist the urge to applaud Abigail’s performance. He knows Alana well enough to be keenly aware how savvy she is. Manipulating her requires a deft touch, and Abigail is still so young and inexperienced. She may have played her part too broadly, tying in a transparent lie about her mother to drum up sympathy, but her youth is also a boon. If Alana expresses concern to Hannibal that Abigail may have a manipulative streak, he can easily assuage her that the girl’s emotions are simply heightened from both her trauma and the turbulence of adolescence.

“And thank you for being understanding when I ran here, Dr. Lecter,” Abigail says, “and for giving me something to look forward to.”

“I’d say you were free to drop-in at any time, but I don’t think Alana would appreciate that after the afternoon she’s had.”

With plans made for Abigail and things smoothed over with Alana, Hannibal sees the two off. As he waves goodbye to them, he sees that during the tense conversations with Abigail or Alana, a package has been left at his office door. He picks it up, and is thrilled to see the postmark from France. It has finally arrived.

He returns to his office and uses a scalpel to slice away the tape sealing the package shut. He pulls the crumpled pages of an edition of *Le Monde* that has been used to wrap the package’s contents for safety. It’s a book - an old paperback with yellowed pages.

Hannibal settles into his chair, finds a comfortable position, and begins to read the French copy of *The Voice of Many Waters*.

To the unlucky few left to read this: first, let me apologize. I am a man accustomed to regret, possessing a pitiable combination of zeal, shortsightedness, and a terminal inability to learn from my own mistakes. But there’s nothing I regret more than the day that I introduced my associate Caesar Lombardi to the rumor of the mysterious Omega boy accumulating a New Age commune in the Everglades. If I hadn’t bullied him into coming along as my sociology advisor in my haste to chase down the story of the strange new society forming in the swamp, the world would be a different place. There’d certainly be more of us left in it.

*****

When Will returns for his session the following week, he enters like a whirlwind. He rushes past Hannibal as the Alpha is still welcoming him in, saying nothing as he throws a battered envelope onto the chaise longe. He collapses into his usual chair and slumps forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands in his sweaty hair.

It's incredibly rude, and Hannibal has disposed of pigs for far less. Yes, once again, Will Graham is somehow an exception. Fascinating and charming in his rudeness in a way those lesser couldn't even begin to replicate.

"I take it that it's been a challenging day," Hannibal says wryly as he sits in the chair opposite Will.

Will grunts and leans back, keeping his hand over his eyes to block out the light of the office. From her place upon the bust of Pallas Athena above the door, Aušrinė murmurs something about encephalitis and photosensitivity across their Tether.

"Been a challenging month," Will mutters. "A challenging year. Challenging life."

"Where would you like to begin? Preferably closer to the present than the moment of your birth."

At least that gets a chuckle out of Will. "There's been a murder. One that might hit close to home for you given your interests. Maybe you've heard about it already."

That gives Hannibal pause. Will's mind is incandescent, and some of his brilliance is uncontrolled and unstable due to the fire raging in his brain. So far it has been enough for Hannibal to feel secure that his activities as the Chesapeake Ripper have remained undetected. But at any moment, Will may experience true clarity and see him for who he is. The idea is as tantalizing as it is troubling, and for weeks he has been trying to decide the best course of action when that inevitable moment comes.

"I'm afraid I'm in the dark," he says.

"A cellist employed by the local opera's orchestra has been killed," Will says. "Whoever did it prepared his vocal chords as if he were the instrument himself. You could play him if you wanted to."

Oh, it's so much better to find out about these interesting works of art from Will instead of through Tattlecrime, Aušrinė marvels. *Now the question is whether or not this new artist is worth chatting with.*

"That's a shame," Hannibal says. "Both for the senseless loss of life, but also because I recently gifted some tickets to the opera's donor gala. I'm sure they'll be cancelling that now, if not the whole season. Justifiably, of course."

Will laughs bitterly. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. Open the envelope."

Hannibal does as instructed and finds two tickets for the very same gala he had donated to Alana and Abigail a mere week ago.

“Jack thinks the murderer is a member of the Baltimore orchestra,” Will says. “He’s making damn sure the event proceeds as planned. Thinks if I get close to the musicians I can pinpoint who did it.”

“You don’t sound like you share this conviction,” Hannibal notes as he tucks the tickets back into the envelope.

Will gives a slow, heavy shrug, as if his shoulders are weighted down with stones. “The perpetrator definitely knows a lot about music; his methods for treating the victim’s vocal chords are authentic and highly practiced. But that doesn’t mean whoever did this is involved with the orchestra.”

“If anything, I’d say it’s more evidence that the killer isn’t a member of the orchestra at all.”

“Like how you know what to do with your cuts of meat once you have them, but not the intricacies of the butchery itself?” Will asks.

“Precisely,” Hannibal says with a smile. He tilts his head, considering. “It’s wise for a professional musician to know what makes a set of strings superior or inferior, as well as where to locate a quality source. Just as it’s good for me to know where the meat I cook comes from. But a working musician employed full-time by an orchestra doesn’t have the time to be a master at preparing strings.”

“That’s why I think we need to be focusing on people who produce musical equipment, not the musicians themselves,” Will says as he leans his head back, stretching the tense muscles of his shoulders. In doing so, he exposes parts of his neck that Hannibal rarely gets to see in their discussions. Unlike the poor murdered cellist, nothing at all needs to be done with the muscle and sinew in Will’s neck to produce art. Hannibal only gets to see for a few seconds before Will slouches back into one of his more typical positions. “Not that it matters what I think. It’s my first day back in the field and everyone’s acting like I’m still concussed.”

“You came into the office in such a rush that I didn’t have the opportunity to ask about that,” Hannibal says. “Should I take that as you holding the door open for us to discuss your recent situation?”

“My ‘recent situation’ was all over the news,” Will grumbles. “You want to know about it, you’ve got plenty of sources.”

“But since you’ve been quite fortunate to remain anonymous through it all, none of those versions are directly from the most important source of all. You’ve gone through this difficult, frankly nightmarish event, and only a handful of people know.”

“And it’s staying that way.”

“Even if it means Gideon’s accomplice remains at large? Even if you don’t find any value in discussing what you went through for your own sake, surely you can recognize the benefit of

closely examining that part of the story if it means finding clues to his identity."

Will sags in his seat, and Hannibal can see from the furrowing of his brow and the twitching of his lips that the Omega is having a very intense conversation with Sabine through their Tether. Hannibal isn't sure if the man or daemon wins out, but when Will speaks his voice is barely above a whisper. "I wasn't completely honest with my report to the FBI."

Will could sit motionless and speechless for hours and still find a way to command all of Hannibal's attention and interest, but somehow he still finds a way to remain surprising. Keeping information from the FBI is not only something that Hannibal can work with, but it is enticing beyond words.

"Whatever you say here is in the strictest confidence, Will," Hannibal says, his voice low and encouraging. "It won't make its way back to Jack and the others."

"The man I saw… Gideon's accomplice. I said he was wearing a mask. That I couldn't see his face."

"But you did see."

Will nods, a barely perceptible little jerk of motion.

"Who was he, Will?" Hannibal asks, leaning forward. Perhaps subconsciously, Will mirrors the movement, drawing the two of them closer together in a quiet, conspiratorial gesture. Just a few feet closer and their breaths could mingle. "Who did you see?"

Will's eyes stare into Hannibal's. Unblinking, unflinching, the blue-gray of overcast skies.

"Garrett Jacob Hobbs," he whispers. The line of his mouth trembles, and Hannibal isn't sure if Will is about to burst into laughter or tears. "I saw Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

Hannibal is silent as he considers Will's words. Will must interpret his silence as either disbelief or pity, two things Hannibal knows the Omega cannot bear. There's an urgency and simmering anger to his words when he continues, "I know it sounds crazy. I know he's dead. I killed him! I put those bullets in his daemon. I-I don't think he's somehow still alive. Something is wrong with me. Something has *been* wrong with me. Ever since Minnesota. I feel… contaminated. Tainted. More than I ever did before."

With a burst of frantic energy, Will stands and stalks over to the window to glare out at the dark autumn night. The distance between where Will now stands and where Aušrinė has been perched during the conversation is too great to not rouse his suspicion, so she glides to land on Hannibal's shoulder as he makes his way to Will.

As he approaches, Hannibal sees that Will is clutching at the pocket where Sabine typically hides away from the world. If Hannibal were less of a patient man, he would worry that any and all of the progress Will and Sabine had been making towards keeping Sabine out in the open has been washed away. And perhaps it's true that the trauma and disease clawing at Will's mind has caused a snag in that progress. It's up to Hannibal to ensure that this snag is merely temporary.

Slowly and quietly, he reaches out to set his hand on Will's shoulder. Will jolts and looks at Hannibal with startled, reddened eyes and a dark flush to his cheeks. Perhaps fever. Perhaps not.

"Would it help to hear that you aren't the first person to say nearly that exact same thing to me this week?"

Will gives him a confused expression for a moment, but when the understanding comes, it comes in a rush. "Abigail," he murmurs. A complicated emotion settles across the Omega's features, largely a mixture of concern and guilt. He steps away from Hannibal, perhaps not being able to bear the comforting touch while talking about the girl he simultaneously saved and orphaned. "You went to see her?"

"She came to see me. Feeling stuck and neglected in her rehabilitation center, she jumped the fence, so to speak. Said much of the same things you did just now, albeit from the other side of the Garrett Jacob Hobbs divide."

"I'd ask how she's doing, but sounds like that'd be a pretty stupid question," Will says. Lost in thought, he drifts away from the window and begins heading back towards his chair. On his way, he glances across Hannibal's desk and freezes in place.

"Is that… is that *The Voice of Many Waters*?" he asks, almost quietly enough that it could have been simply talking to himself. He moves to the desk to get a closer look. "In French?"

"Apparently it's very out of print. I could only find it in translation."

"You sought it out?" Will mutters. His tone sounds like he can't decide if he's feeling curious or betrayed. "Why?"

"When you brought it up in the daemonology museum, it was clear that it left a strong impact on you. I thought if I read it I could gain some insight into you. I must say, it was certainly revelatory."

All of the color drains from Will's face. For a moment, Hannibal is concerned that Will might faint dead away or bolt wordlessly into the night. But he holds on, and he fixes Hannibal with a hard, unblinking stare. "What do you mean?"

"To be clear, what I'm about to point to isn't something that I think happened to you. I think you resent the defamatory nature of the parts of the novel."

"Spit it out," Will grits through his teeth. In Will's voice, it's a marvelous tone. From anyone else's tongue, it would merit Hannibal revisiting his favorite recipe for *lengua rellena*.

"You're an Omega born to a Witch, an exceptionally rare thing to be. Here is a novel where the author has written a Witch-born Omega as not just an eerie, oversexed cult leader, but the literal Antichrist. I imagine it was upsetting to see the young man's daemon remain unsettled even after his eighteenth birthday, only to settle into the form of the Beast from Revelation once he successfully initiates Armaggeddon after an orgy that culminates in the ritualized murder of the narrator's lovestruck assistant. It's absurd to someone like me, unaffected by all

of the negative stereotypes. I imagine it was insulting to someone like you, to see a parody of your life written in leering, exploitative prose."

"Sabine wasn't settled when I read the book," Will says quietly.

"I could see how that would get under one's skin, especially if you suspected that you'd eventually present as an Omega."

"I didn't. I knew there was no way I'd be an Alpha. And, like everyone else, I thought Witches didn't give birth to Omegas. So… my whole childhood, I was prepared to be a Beta."

"Did it surprise you, this unlikely twist of fate?"

Will breaks the gaze and turns his back on Hannibal. "I had other things on my mind. Didn't even really register until a few weeks after the fact," he mutters.

Another reference to Sabine's traumatic settling, Aušrinė muses. *He's close to finally talking about it. Press him.*

"Will-"

"Come with me to the opera gala!" Will interrupts. A desperate and obvious diversionary tactic, but interesting regardless. "Please. I was going to go with Jack so we could keep an eye out for suspects, but… Bella's sick. And it's really serious. Apparently she was going to try to keep it to herself as long as she could, but her daemon couldn't bear not telling Themis about it. He's taking some time off to spend with her so they can decide what to do next. Jack trusts you. Said you'd be a good fit for this, since you know the opera and its audience. He tried to keep the fact that you're better with people than I am subtext."

It's disappointing that Will still doesn't feel comfortable opening up about Sabine's settling, but it isn't surprising. Hannibal considers what to do next. The opportunity to press Will to open up seems gone, killed mercilessly by the Omega before Hannibal could really take advantage. He could press the matter anyway, but suspects that would get him nothing but Will's resentment.

"I'd be happy to go with you, Will," Hannibal says. "And I hope that you know that Jack isn't the only one who can trust me."

"I know," Will whispers. "I… want to."

"But when silence has been your reality for so long, the idea of agreeing to be known by another conjures equal portions of dread and delight."

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

"Then just knowing that you want to trust is monumental. When you're ready to move beyond that first step, I'll be here."

Will mutters his thanks and turns away from Hannibal, most likely in an attempt to hide the tears that have begun to well up in his eyes. Even though Sabine has been hidden away all session and Will's secretive and anxious tendencies have been exacerbated by the recent physical and psychological traumas inflicted upon him, Hannibal still feels a sense of progress with Will. The desire for trust is there, and he will nurture that and see it bloom.

*****

The sun hangs low, red, and fat in the sky when Hannibal and Aušrinė arrive at the Baltimore opera on Saturday evening. He does not see Will lurking at the entrance, but given how early he has arrived, that isn't surprising. It's far from a waste, however, as it gives Hannibal time to mingle with the other early arrivals. Most are familiar to him from his years attending similar parties and events in Baltimore's arts scene, and he knows them all well enough to sense curious gossip beginning to simmer as they wonder who the notoriously uncoupled Hannibal Lecter may be waiting for.

When Will arrives, Hannibal knows that that gossip is likely going to erupt into a boil. In stark contrast to the wild, unkempt hair Will has had during both his most recent therapy session and the day Aušrinė observed him dealing with the strange animal in his barn, Will's curls are combed and tidy. His choice of clothing also speaks to the amount of effort the Omega has put towards making himself presentable for the evening - a dark maroon shirt beneath a well-fitting black jacket and matching pants. As much as Hannibal would love to see Sabine comfortable enough to cling to Wills' clothes and shift her colors to compliment his ensemble, he can see the small bump of her body hidden away within one of the jacket pockets. The only hints towards Will's health difficulties are the lingering tiredness to his eyes behind his glasses and that his skin is a bit paler than usual, but both are subtle enough that Hannibal thinks someone who has never met Will wouldn't even notice.

He looks magnificent, and the fact that the color choices in his wardrobe will match well with Hannibal's own dark brown suit, burnt sienna button-down, and teal paisley tie is an excellent bonus. A perfect autumnal pair.

"Sorry I cut it so close with the time," Will says. "It took longer than I thought to get ready."

"No trouble at all, especially since the end result is clearly worth the effort."

Will flushes at the compliment. Instead of offering thanks, he simply stares down at the tickets and mutters, "Looks like Jack managed to get us box seats. Probably so I can get a bird's-eye view of the orchestra during the performance. See if any of them stick out."

Hannibal leads them through the spacious lobby and up the carpeted stairs leading to the box seats. The tickets Jack procured are on the opposite side of the theater and further back than Hannibal's usual private seats. Once he and Will have settled in, he looks across the theater to his normal box; he can just barely see Abigail and Alana already there. It's pleasant to see them, but also a bit surprising. Hannibal had fully expected Alana to cancel in light of the murder of the cellist. Perhaps Abigail managed to talk her into it a second time.

The orchestra below hums with the pleasant noise of musicians warming up for their upcoming performances, and the house lights on the curtains shift gently between colors in

time with the groups of instruments. A warm yellow for the horns, a gentle blue for the strings, a pure white for the harps and pianos.

“Have you ever attended the opera, Will?” Hannibal asks.

“Hell no. I never even went to a theater that didn’t reek of yesterday’s stale popcorn and sticky soda-drenched floors until I was in college,” he says. “I feel like an impostor here. I won’t know what any of these people are singing unless one of them gets confused and mistakes ‘opera’ for ‘opry.’”

“Perhaps they should, if only so I could see some of the reactions from my fellow arts patrons.”

Will laughs and looks down at the musicians in the orchestra pit, the conductor with the long green plumage of quetzal daemon trailing down her back, the audience murmuring quietly to themselves. His laughter dies away and his face grows serious as he observes them.

“It’s strange to think that he might be here, now, somewhere down there,” he muses. “That nobody knows who could be here with us. Besides us.”

There’s a world of double-meaning in his words that Hannibal is desperate to explore with Will. But before he can reply, the house lights lower and the orchestra launches into its first real piece of the evening.

The impresario walks on stage to applause and begins with an *in memoriam* speech dedicating the evening’s art to the recently deceased cellist, allowing for a moment of silence on his behalf. Will is particularly focused at this time, scanning to see signs of anyone behaving oddly or irreverently.

After that, the night’s entertainment moves along swiftly. The orchestra is in top form, albeit with one very pointed empty seat in the strings section. The impresario introduces the performers in his company one by one, allowing each to perform their most impressive arias to tempt the audience with the talent on display for the upcoming season. One soprano, a Beta woman with a capuchin monkey daemon, has such a striking voice that it stirs Hannibal to tears and a standing ovation after her rendition of Handel’s *Piangero la sorte mia*.

From what he sees of Will’s reaction, the Omega is often equally enchanted by the performances, although he seems a bit distracted from time to time. Every so often, he winces slightly and grips at the spot where Sabine hides away in his suit jacket. Aušrinė finds her attention drawn every time he does it, and she sends idle ponderings about whether the material is too sweltering or otherwise uncomfortable for Will’s daemon across her Tether with Hannibal.

When the intermission comes and the house lights glow back to life, Will sighs heavily. “Time to work.”

The lobby is bustling with patrons. Some are getting pleasantly tipsy off of the wine, others hurrying to find the oboist who impressed them, and all are chatting with each other over the strength of the performances despite the shocking and depressing recent circumstances.

Mere moments after they enter the lobby, Will and Hannibal are intercepted by an older Alpha woman in a sleek red dress. Her blue jay daemon perches atop a black veiled fascinator on her head, and his cerulean feathers are a striking addition to her overall look. “Hannibal! I was hoping I’d run into you here,” she greets happily. She looks at Will, and a devious gleam lights up in her eyes. “And who is this?”

Hannibal looks to Will, and now that they are in brighter lighting, he can see that Will’s face is looking a bit more clammy than when he first arrived, and the sickly sweet scent of his ailment is stronger. But just when Hannibal is about to interject to make introductions on Will’s behalf, the Omega replies.

“Um, Will Graham. My daemon’s name is Sabine, but, uh - we’re not good with crowds.”

“Oh, absolutely nothing to apologize about. I’m Ellen Komeda, and this little gentleman,” she gestures to her daemon, “is Truman. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Komeda… E.G. Komeda, the novelist?”

“One and the same! Though that’s the name I use for the airport books that pay the bills. The interesting, spicy stuff gets another name entirely. Goodness, it’s been so long since Hannibal brought someone new to a function like this. There’s so much to talk ab-,” her words cut off as she takes a moment to really appraise Will, who fidgets under her stare. “Are you feeling well, dear? You look a little peaky.”

“Uh, I think I just need to use the intermission to get some fresh air,” Will says.

“Would you like me to go with you?” Hannibal asks.

“No, no need to tear you away from your friend just because I need a breather. I’ll be back in no time.” Will turns and offers a small smile to Ellen. “It was nice meeting you. Sorry I’m not much of a social butterfly.”

Ellen waves her hand and says, “Again, no need to apologize. I’m sure we can become better acquainted in a less crowded setting sometime soon. Perhaps during one of Hannibal’s divine dinner parties?”

Will smiles vaguely and nods, offering a weak wave before he makes a hasty retreat.

As soon as he is out of earshot, Ellen shoots an accusatory look at Hannibal. “Hannibal Lecter,” she says by way of chastisement.

“Ellen Komeda,” Hannibal replies with a smirk.

“Oh no, don’t you play coy with me, Hannibal. You didn’t tell me you were seeing someone! Was I supposed to find out in the society pages like the common rabble?”

“Will is simply a friend.”

Ellen gives a skeptical hum. “There’s nothing ‘simply’ about anything you do, doctor,” she teases. “Familiar looking young man though. His name too. I know I’ve never met him

before, but there's something about him… oh! A model? Let me guess: Burberry."

"If Will has ever modeled, it's something I don't know about. He's a teacher, mostly."

"A teacher! Well, lucky students," Ellen says with a giggle. "Still, that doesn't explain why he looks so-"

"Do you happen to read Tattlecrime?" a voice interjects.

Hannibal and Ellen turn in unison towards the voice, and Hannibal is briefly surprised and eternally dismayed to see Franklyn Froideveaux hovering near an Alpha man that Hannibal has never seen before. Standing together, the two look like something out of a picture book dedicated to explaining the concept of opposites to young children. Where Franklyn is short, plump, and radiates enough nervous energy to power the greater Baltimore area for at least a fortnight, his companion is tall, thin, and composed. Franklyn's dog daemon wags her stubby little tail as she gazes up adoringly at Aušrinė, while the Alpha man's male lyrebird daemon stands at his side exuding a calm and collected haughtiness. This must be Tobias, the new 'friend' Franklyn had been rambling about.

"That rag?" Ellen scoffs. "Only because I write thrillers. What tedious research. Why do you ask, Mr…"

"Budge, but just Tobias is fine," the man replies. "And my daemon Guarnerius. I couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation. I think you recognize Will Graham because he has appeared as the subject of several Tattlecrime articles. He teaches for the FBI, but lately they've taken to sending him out into the field. He's been… quite controversial. Not as much of a clear line between the investigators and the investigated, if you catch my meaning."

The words are clearly meant to provoke, but it seems to slide off of Ellen's impervious demeanor like water off a duck's back.

"Oh, marvelous!" she exclaims. She turns her attention to Hannibal and continues, "Do you think Will would be willing to let me interview him for my book? That way I don't have to keep putting up with more of that Lounds woman's frankly dreadful writing. It's just so tacky."

"I can ask, but he can be rather recalcitrant when it comes to opening up," Hannibal replies.

He chances a quick glance to Tobias, whose lips are pursed in slight irritation over Ellen's complete disinterest in his attempt to stir up gossip. Normally he'd be right on the money and Ellen would be thrilled to indulge in a conversation about a juicy scandal. But she seems convinced that Hannibal has romantic designs on Will, and she clearly trusts his sense of taste over the opinion of an eavesdropping stranger. Wise woman.

Perhaps feeling ignored, Franklyn blunders into the conversation. "No need to keep the topic on someone who clearly doesn't have the social charms to be a good conversation partner, right? Did you know Tobias is the supplier of all the strings the orchestra uses here at the opera? He's here all the time. Knows the place like the back of his hand!"

“Is that so?” Hannibal asks. “Do you do strings for harpsichord as well? I happen to own one that is probably overdue for a restringing.”

“All strings means all strings,” Tobias says with a smirk as his daemon preens his long, curling feathers conspicuously. He pulls out a black personalized Montblanc business card holder and hands one of his cards to Hannibal. The paper is crisp and the design on the card sleek and professional.

Chordophone String Shop ~ Tobias Budge, Owner and Operator.
Fine catgut strings and instrument tuning.
Violin, viola, and cello mentorship by audition only.

“Then I hope you don’t mind me asking where you import yours from,” Hannibal says as he tucks the card away. He has just the spot for it in his kitchen rolodex.

“You wound my pride as a professional,” Tobias says, splaying his fingers over his chest as if Hannibal has thrust a dagger into his heart. It’s an image Hannibal is finding himself keen to see. “I prepare all the strings I sell myself. It’s the only way to do it right.”

There you are, Aušrinė croons across the Tether.

Hannibal ponders if Tobias is a seasoned killer who has gotten away with so much for so long that he has become brazen, or a rookie who has only killed once and now thinks himself invulnerable. It doesn’t really matter ultimately; either way, it invites sloppiness. And sloppiness tends to end a career quickly.

“Naturally,” Hannibal says, giving Tobias a smile. “I appreciate your dedication to your craft.”

Tobias turns his attention to Ellen and offers her one of his cards. “And are you also in the market for strings, ma’am?”

She politely declines with a motion of her hand. “I’m afraid the only instrument I play is my vintage typewriter, and she is a very jealous mistress. She’d hire a hitman to take care of the competition.”

“In that case, I’ll leave you to your conversation. I need to see how my contacts here in the orchestra are holding up after this month’s earlier… unpleasantness,” Tobias says. He gives a nod to Ellen and fixes Hannibal with one last appraising look, “I hope to see you in my shop soon. I’m sure you’ve put a lot of yourself into the upkeep of your harpsichord, and I’d be happy to help you put more in.”

“Absolutely. I’d love to pick your brain over it.”

Something flashes in Tobias’s eyes, perhaps suspicion or recognition or some half-formed fusion of the two. But before it can coalesce into anything more, Tobias catches sight of something or someone behind Hannibal, and he quickly strides past and out into the crowd.

Franklyn gives a surprised little sound and looks back and forth between Tobias's retreating back and Hannibal. It is in that moment of hesitation that Hannibal knows he will not have the good fortune of Franklyn following his new friend like a puppy with separation anxiety. Franklyn grins what he must think is his most winning grin before he says, "I can stick around for a nice chat. He's my ride, so it's not like he'll just leave me stranded, right?"

Ellen purses her lips and shakes her head before quickly draining her drink. Hannibal can sympathize.

The fact that Ellen does not immediately flee once Franklyn begins unprompted gushing about the finer points of cheese lore is a testament to her character. Perhaps she's hoping that the increasingly unimpressed and oppressive atmosphere settling over both herself and Hannibal will be enough to get through even to Franklyn and convince him to move on of his own volition. If that's the case, she must really want to keep pressing Hannibal about Will.

But the strength of her conviction is no match for Franklyn's desperation. After nearly ten minutes, she finally gives in. "I should probably make the rounds as well," she says. "Don't want to deprive the public of my dazzling company. Hannibal, don't forget what I said about hosting another one of your magnificent dinner parties. Especially if it means I can convince Will to let me interview him."

"I'll do my best on both fronts."

"Wonderful! Enjoy buttering him up. I know I would." With a wink and a flourish of a wave, Ellen saunters off, abandoning Hannibal to Franklyn's company.

"You know, if you do throw that dinner party, I can bring a cheese plate," Franklyn offers. "I'm starting to think I have what it takes to become a master at charcuterie."

Hannibal stares at the little man for a long moment, privately considering the logistics of committing murder in the middle of a crowded gala. He waits for a group of chatting opera patrons to pass by before he reaches into his coat pocket and removes a small leather-bound notepad and pen set. He scribbles down a few numbers and hands the page to Franklyn.

"A phone number?" he asks. His eyes gleam when he looks back up at Hannibal. "Your personal number? You want to invite me to the dinner pa-"

"A colleague's number," Hannibal interrupts. "I think it's best for the future of your therapy that it be handled by another psychiatrist."

Some of the hope that had lit up Franklyn's eyes dims, but he rallies. "Because it'd be inappropriate to be friends with someone who's also a patient?"

"No, Franklyn. That isn't why."

Franklyn sputters, struggling to find the right combination of consonants and vowels to express his dismay and unfounded betrayal. "B-but I came to you on a recommendation! I've already been rejected by two other psychiatrists."

“And perhaps it has something to do with your inability to accept professional boundaries.”

“And to do this to me in public…”

“Which did not have to be the case, if you hadn’t intentionally sought me out in my personal life outside of your therapy sessions.”

Sniffling, Franklyn stuffs the paper unceremoniously into his pants pocket. “Fine,” he says, lip quivering. “I can tell when I’m wanted. I’m not as pathetic as everyone thinks I am, you know.”

With that, he storms away, muttering about finding Tobias and convincing him to sell Hannibal the worst strings he has. He may be trying to put on a show of toughness, but the way his daemon carries her stubby little tail between her legs as she follows him says it all.

Hm. Do you think we should tell him Tobias wants to snap his neck? Aušrinė ponders.

And ruin the surprise? Hannibal replies. *Not very sportsmanlike.*

He strides away in the opposite direction from where Franklyn stormed off, hoping to catch sight of Will’s delightful curls bobbing somewhere in the murmuring crowd of gala attendees. The intermission will be over soon, and he’d like to have a quick, quiet moment together to compare notes before it’s time for the show to resume. He will feign ignorance of finding anything actionable in their search for the cellist’s killer and, if Will somehow has met Tobias during the intermission and suspects him, will offer just enough to muddy the waters and slow Will’s hunt. He needs just enough time to visit Budge’s shop and proceed from there.

Perhaps it’s the bright mood he’s in, having more conversation with Will to look forward to and the upcoming absence of Franklyn on his weekly patient schedule, but Hannibal thinks he’ll let Tobias kill Franklyn as a show of good faith. It’s the least he can do, since the Ripper will then exert his status as Baltimore’s apex predator. All these idle daydreams are subject to Tobias doing anything to spoil his generous mood, of course.

Unfortunately, there’s no sign of Will in the crowd. Instead, he spots Alana also scanning the attendees with a sense of urgency to her movements. Their eyes meet, and his colleague hurries across the lobby to his side.

“Hannibal, have you seen Abigail?” she asks, slightly breathless. “She said she was going to the bathroom, but that was almost half an hour ago.”

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t. I’m actually looking for Will as well. He’s been gone about as long as that.”

Alana looks taken aback. “Will is here?” she asks. Her voice is hesitant, as if she isn’t sure if she should be intrigued or somehow slighted.

“He’d rather not be,” Hannibal admits, his voice low so as to not attract eavesdroppers. “Jack has us scouting for any potential leads regarding the cellist murder.”

That seems to placate Alana, and her shoulders relax slightly. “After I found out about that, I knew we shouldn’t have come. But Abigail really was looking forward to this. Maybe they ran into each other and started talking? Lost track of time? Neither are particularly eager conversationalists, though. And they don’t strike me as the type to want to share the same tense, brooding silence.”

Before Hannibal can reply, a scream cuts through the air and abruptly silences the happy sounds of idle gossip amongst the idle rich. A few seconds later, another scream echoes into the lobby, and this time it’s a name. “Tobias!”

The crowd splits like a great shelf of ice sloughing off a glacier, quickly and noisily. Half hang back, too shaken to follow the voice. The other half, Alana and Hannibal included, break away and move towards the sound, leaving the lobby for a corridor down the east wing. Most of the rooms there are used for costume changes and storage, and the fact that anyone has gotten there this evening must mean that some staff member must have left the area unlocked.

Near the end of a long hallway, Franklyn sits collapsed on the polished marble floor, his clothing in disarray from his fall and subsequent desperate scrambling. His daemon Francine cowers behind him, her wiry fur raised and her nails clacking against the floor as she trembles violently. The Beta looks at the crowd he has attracted, and his face is white and glistening with panicked sweat. He points towards the doorway he has backed away from and tries to say something, but his voice is hoarse from screaming. All he can manage is half of Tobias’s name, stuttered out through clattering teeth.

The room in front of Franklyn is large and mostly empty, having only a few items of note: a few cardboard boxes pressed up against the walls, some extra folding chairs stacked neatly in the back, and the body of Tobias Budge lying slumped in a large pool of blood. His shirt is torn and stained red where his abdomen has been sliced open and his throat slit. There is no obvious sign of a weapon; whoever did this must have either brought something themselves or improvised and took the implement with them.

As other voices start to scream and call for security, an ambulance, and the police, Hannibal’s attention is drawn to one thing in particular. A set of bloody cloven hoofprints lead a few steps away from the pool of blood under Budge before smearing strangely and stopping abruptly.

“Oh my God,” Alana breathes beside him. “Abigail. H-Hannibal, help me find her. Will too.”

Hannibal murmurs his agreement and instructs Alana to keep her search to the lobby and the west wing while he looks here in the east wing. As soon as she has left in search of the girl, Hannibal begins his search as well. But he isn’t looking for Abigail, at least not yet. He has something else in mind first.

He knows exactly where to go, having scouted the opera building thoroughly before - just in case it would make an excellent setting for a piece of his art. The panic and chaos surrounding him makes for excellent cover as he makes his way, calmly and confidently, to where the opera keeps its rather ironically poorly-secured and aging security camera system. He has a tape to procure.

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